

Springfield's Nightmare Before Christmas
by Susan L. Carr (aka Skeeter451)

Act One

Olivia stumbled into the kitchen and headed for the coffeepot and her favorite mug waiting beside it. It wasn't until she had filled the mug and taken a deep drink that she noticed the other occupants of the room. Natalia sat at the table, with Emma in the seat next to her eating her breakfast and Francesca in her high chair smearing her hair with her Cheerios. Leyla also sat nursing her own coffee mug.

"Morning," Olivia grunted her voice thick with sleep.

"Good morning." Natalia flashed Olivia a pair of perfect dimples. "Want some eggs and toast?"

Olivia shook her head. "I'll just have what this beauty is having," she said, leaning down and nuzzling Francesca's belly, making the baby giggle and start smearing the wet lumps of cereal in Olivia's hair.

"Ama!" Francesca laughed and Olivia pulled back.

"Yes, baby?"

"Mwah!" the little girl exclaimed as she made an exaggerated kissy face. Olivia interpreted this to mean 'I love you, Mommy!'

"Mwah, you too, my little Sweet Pea," she said, kissing her daughter on the top of the head, careful to avoid the smeared goo. She looked up to see her partner watching them with adoration. Leyla and Emma, on the other hand, wore matching smirks. She coughed to hide her embarrassment. "So...what are we working on?" she asked, pointing at the various magazines spread out among the breakfast plates.

"Emma and Francesca's Halloween costumes," Natalia answered. "We're looking for theme ideas."

"Well, Sweet Pea's is easy," Olivia said, topping off her coffee and then sitting down next to Natalia. "Just pop her in a pink onesie and sailor hat and she can go as Swee'Pea."

Leyla snorted. "And maybe Emma can be Olive Oyl and Frank Bluto?"

Olivia laughed and leaned over to kiss Natalia. "And you can be Popeye since you're the strongest one of all."

"And what about you?" Natalia asked with a saucy grin. "You like to eat your spinach."

"Me?" Olivia leaned back in her chair and mimicked pulling at imaginary suspenders. "I'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a Buzz burger today."

Natalia nearly spit out her orange juice with laughter. "Oh, you are so not Wimpy, my love."

They all turned as a knock sounded and then the door opened to admit Ava. Immediately the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees as Leyla glared at Olivia's daughter.

"Hi, honey," Olivia said quickly. "Sorry I'm not ready yet, but thanks for coming to pick me up for the meeting."

"No problem, Mom...I'm early anyway," she said. "We've got plenty of time."

"Came for some free breakfast?" Leyla asked with a sneer.

"Hello! Room service," Ava shot back.

"Not the same as home-cooked, is it?"

"I never see you slaving over the stove anytime I'm here," Ava retorted.

"I do plenty!"

Olivia broke in and said, "Bean, if you're done why don't you go get ready for school, okay?"

The little girl nodded and with a worried look at her sister and aunt, left the kitchen.

"Girls, come on, let's be civil," Olivia said.

"Civil?" Ava said. "She wouldn't know civil if it whacked her in her fat head."

"Hey!" Leyla protested.

"Nag, nag, nag all the time," Ava went on. "I feel sorry for anyone who'd want to marry a harpy like you."

"Ava," Olivia said, trying not to raise her voice. "Apologize this instant."

"I can't believe this," Ava said, turning on her mother. "You're taking her side, Mom? Oh that's just great."

"I'm not taking anyone's side," Olivia said, "but I expect the adults of this house to act like adults."

"It's okay, Olivia," Leyla said. "I don't need anyone to defend me. Besides, she's all bark and no bite."

"Oh, I'll show you bite, you bitch!" With that, Ava rushed toward Leyla and hit Francesca's chair with her hip, startling the baby who started to wail a moment later.

"Okay, that's it!" Natalia said, standing up to pick up the crying baby. "You two – take it to the barn if you're going to act like animals."

"Natalia..." Ava started.

"Out!" she pointed, her posture stiff with anger even as she tried to settle the baby. "I will not have this house and family disrupted by all this constant bickering."

Leyla huffed, shoved back her chair as she stood up and stormed out the door.

Ava turned to her mother, but avoided her glare. "Sorry, Mom," she said. "I'll wait for you in the car."

Once outside, the two women continued their arguing, their voices carrying through the closed door. Natalia stood at the window and watched as she soothed the still-crying baby. Olivia joined her a moment later and then asked, "Do they remind you of anyone?" She pointed at the fighting duo.

"Who?" Natalia asked, confused, and then her eyebrows scrunched together. "Oh no! Do not even go there, Olivia."

"I'm just sayin'..."

"Go get dressed. You and Ava have to get to that meeting," she said jerking her head toward the kitchen door.

"Yes, dear," Olivia said and kissed her. "Love you."

"Mwah!" Natalia blew a kiss at her departing partner.

Olivia glanced at her daughter's profile thinking about the events of earlier. Ava was focused on the road and didn't seem to notice her mother's inspection. After a few moments, Olivia asked, "Why do you let her get to you like that?"

"You mean Leyla 'the harpy' Rivera?" Ava asked with a sneer. "She doesn't get to me, Mom. She's just such a hypocrite. She's always accusing me of taking advantage of you and Natalia, but she's the one living in your home and working in your hotel. Does she even pay you two for room and board?"

Olivia decided *not* to answer that, especially since Ava's suite at the Beacon was comped. "I'm glad that Natalia's reunited with at least one family member. Having her sister here makes Natalia happy and that makes me happy."

"Yeah, but she's still only Natalia's sister."

Olivia sighed. "Ava honey, I know for a long time it was only the three of us and Sam off on his adventures, but weren't we always looking for more? Now we have it. We have a big, crazy and wonderful extended family. It's not perfect, but it's ours and I'm not letting go of any of it. So please, Ava...for me? At least *try* to get along with her."

"I'll try," she pouted. "But no promises."

"Thank you, baby," Olivia said and then opened up the file folder sitting on her lap. She glanced once again at the details of the property they were looking to purchase. "Okay, so let's figure out how we're going to tag-team this guy until he lowers his asking price."

She turned to Ava and chuckled as Ava made a point of expanding her chest to show off the revealing blouse she wore under her blazer. "That's my girl," she said with a proud grin.

Eleni Andros walked down the quiet and cool corridor of the Cedar's lower basement on her way to the morgue. Only one attendant was on duty and sitting at the desk. She showed him her identification and requested access to the small evidence and records room. He stood up and ushered her into the room after unlocking it.

"Thank you," she said, looking around the room and taking note of the various file cabinets and specimen lockers.

He hesitated a moment. "What is it you're looking for?" he asked.

"Not really sure yet," she answered. "But if I need any help, I'll let you know." After he left her alone, Eleni opened the closest file cabinet and pulled out a folder and began to read.

Sometime later, a short stack of folders lay on the desk. She intended to give them a closer review back at her office. Picking up the thickest, which was marked Winslow, E. SPD372891-D, she pulled a log sheet and walked over to the cold storage sample chest. Checking the cross-reference, she pulled several vials of tissue samples and left behind a chain of evidence form. She placed the vials in her kit. She already knew the samples would not prove to be from Edmund Winslow, but she wanted to double check. If the sample wasn't from Winslow, it would be further evidence of DeSilva's evidence tampering.

Checking her notes, she pulled additional samples from cases she suspected were also tampered with. On a few of them, she had noticed the investigating officer was Det. M. Cooper. Closing her evidence kit, she gathered up her files and left the room.

"Find what you're looking for?" the same attendant asked. She noted he had a sandwich and soda on his desk and realized how much time had passed.

"I've made a start, thank you," she said. "Tell me, most of the evidence here is less than two years old. What happens to the evidence from older cases?"

"If samples are not needed by the DA's office or the cases are sent over to the cold case files at the PD, then it's stored at a facility in Chicago. The ME's office will have the manifests referenced by case number."

"All right," she said. "Thanks so much for your help." She walked down the corridor in the direction of the elevator, her rubber soles squeaking on the polished tile of the floor. Turning the corner, she caught a glimpse of her daughter pushing her way through the stairwell doors. With a frown, Eleni picked up her pace to follow.

Once in the stairwell, she heard Marina's footsteps rushing up the stairs and then the sound of the ground floor door opening. By the time she reached the landing, she was nearly running and when she pushed through the door, she saw Marina looking carefully around the loading bay.

"Marina!" she called, finally catching up.

Marina's head snapped around. "Mom! What are you doing here?"

"Working," she answered, tired of her daughter's petulant tone. "What about you?"

"Same thing, not that it's any of your business," Marina said. "Since coming back on the force, I've got a lot to do."

"In the morgue?" Eleni asked. "Which case? There are no autopsies going on. I was there all morning and it was quiet."

"Just needed to check something for an old case," Marina said. "But I've got to run. Shayne is watching Henry and needs to get to work."

"Well, wait a second," Eleni said, stopping Marina's departure. "Some of the cases DeSilva worked on were yours and I have a few questions."

"Well...go through regular channels," Marina said with a scowl. "That's how we do things here in Springfield – by the book. Don't expect special consideration because you used to be married to the chief."

"Hey!" Eleni said, her temper finally breaking. She closed her eyes in an attempt to control herself. "I am still your mother and expect your respect," she said peering closely at her daughter. "So if you don't have time to answer my questions, then I'll have to find the answers elsewhere."

But remember – I'm a scientist looking for the truth – don't expect special consideration because I'm your mother."

"What's that's supposed to mean?" Marina huffed as she put her hands on her hips.

"Nothing, I hope," Eleni answered.

Marina rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I've got to go get my son."

Eleni watched her daughter leave the loading area as she worriedly bit the inside of her lip.

"She's straight!" Doris exclaimed. She looked over the table at Olivia. Doris had invited her friend to lunch at Towers and had just mentioned the phone call she received from Blake that morning asking her to dinner.

"Doris," Olivia said. "Two years ago you and everyone else who knows me would have testified on a stack of Bibles as tall as the Empire State Building that I was the straightest woman in Springfield. But you watched me change over that time; why can't Blake change as well?"

"You don't know what it's like, Olivia," Doris said, shaking her head with a heavy sigh. "I've been with plenty of straight women. In college, I had LUGs coming of the woodwork."

"LUGs?"

"Lesbian Until Graduation," Doris explained. "Women who use the freedom of college as a way to experiment with all that life has to offer before they settle down to their normal lives with their normal husbands and have their normal children."

"But Blake's already had all that," Olivia said, pointing emphatically at Doris. "She's a grown woman who has already experienced a lot that life has to offer. She obviously likes you and is open to the possibility of love. And..." Olivia gave her a wicked grin. "I happen to know for a fact that she likes toys."

Doris's mouth dropped open. "How the heck do you know that? Did Natalia share the contents of your toy chest with her one day during a book signing?"

Olivia chuckled. "No, nothing like that," she said. "Last year before Natalia and I got together I was feeling a little...frustrated...and Blake suggested her favorite remedy." Olivia smirked as Doris's eyes unfocused, her mind seeming to go to a very happy place. "Um, Earth to Doris?"

"What?" Doris snapped back to reality.

"Just give her a chance, Doris," Olivia said.

Doris sighed and glanced around the restaurant as she seemed to mull Olivia's words over. "I don't know," she finally said. "It's hard enough when a woman who likes only women hurts you, but when you get involved with a straight woman, your chance of getting burned is that much higher."

"Maybe so, but if you won't even give it a chance to work, it'll never even have a chance to fail," Olivia said. "Just think about it, Doris...there's no rush."

Doris smiled. "So...tell me a little bit more about Blake's favorite remedy."

Natalia rushed into her office at the Beacon and dumped her purse down on her desk. Turning on her laptop, she waited impatiently for it to boot up.

"Come on," she muttered under her breath as she clicked on her browser icon. Finally, the program loaded, but then she had to close the extra windows. "At last!" she said, pulling up the USO website. After a couple of clicks, she was logged into the family chat area and then sat back and waited.

Nibbling on her thumb, she waited until at last the computer dinged and showed an incoming message announcement. Bouncing in her seat, she eagerly clicked on the window.

"Hi, baby!" she typed.

"Hey, Ma," she received in her window. "Click on the webcam, remember?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot," she typed and did as he asked. After a moment, the video box popped up and her son's beautiful face came up on her screen. She felt her eyes fill with tears. "Oh, Rafael!"

"Hello, Ma," he smiled.

"Have you lost more weight?" she asked. "Did you take your blood sugar today? What was it before dinner?"

"No, Ma, I haven't lost weight. I'm still the same as when you saw me," he said. "And my sugar is fine. You're looking good. Everything okay there in Crazyland?"

"Oh yes," she said, resting her head on her propped hand as she looked at the image of her son. "We're getting ready for Halloween. It's Sweet Pea's first and we're looking forward to it."

"Don't forget to send lots of pictures," he said pointing at her through the screen. "I can't wait to see my baby sister in a costume."

"Don't worry," she said. "Olivia is an absolute fiend with her camera. She's filled up several external drives with photographs of Francesca alone."

Rafe laughed, his sun-darkened face brightening the screen. "That's classic. Hey! Don't forget that my baby shower gift will be done next month. Send a picture of it so I can show it off to all my buddies. They love hearing about our crazy family."

"You tell them about us?" she said, surprised.

"Sure I do, Ma," he grinned. "You and Olivia are considered by the camp to be the hottest MILFs back home."

"MILFs?" Natalia asked, her face scrunching in confusion.

Rafe leaned forward and typed his answer in the chat box substituting a euphemism for the last word, laughing all the while.

Natalia's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "Rafael!"

"I'm just kidding, Ma," he said. "Everyone here just loves hearing about each other's families and believe me, there are lots of families that are just like ours."

"Thank you, baby," she said, tears in her eyes. "I'm so sad that you'll miss Thanksgiving with us again, not to mention Sweet Pea's first birthday."

"Yeah, me too," he said, his grin turning wry. "I don't suppose Olivia has any pull with the Commander-in-Chief?"

"I wouldn't put it past her to try," she said. "Should I ask?"

"Nah," he laughed. "Just kidding. Besides, I really need to be here, Ma."

"I know, baby," she said. "I'm so proud of you, *mi hijo*, but I'm so scared for you every day."

"I'll be fine, Ma," he said and glanced to the side. "Well, my time's up and the next guy needs the computer before it gets too late here. *Te quiero, Mamá.*"

"*Te quiero, también*, Rafael," she said. "Sleep well and stay safe, okay?" Even though she knew it was senseless, she touched the screen wishing desperately she could touch his face.

"Okay, Ma," he said. "Give kisses to Olivia and my sisters for me and a big hug for Aunt Leyla."

"I will, I promise," she said. "Good night, Rafe."

"Night, Ma," he said and leaned forward to close the connection.

Natalia stood and wiped at her tears so that their employees wouldn't notice them and then she left the office to seek out a much needed hug from her partner.

Olivia looked up as a knock sounded on her office door frame and saw Natalia's head poke around it a moment later.

"Hey beautiful," she said with a smile, which immediately fell when she noticed Natalia's eyes. She glanced at the clock and saw the time. She quickly stood to take Natalia in her arms. "Oh hey, is he okay?" she asked.

Natalia nodded. "He's fine, he's good. He looks good – tanned and healthy. Strong."

"Then why the tears, baby?" she asked even though she knew the answer. Not a day went by when they both didn't worry for his physical safety and mental well-being, which only increased with each news report of another soldier killed. And ever since his last visit, when Rafe had finally fully accepted her into his heart and family, Olivia had come to love the young man for his own sake and not just for his mother's. Were anything to happen to him, she would be just as devastated as his birth mother.

Natalia shrugged, although she clung to Olivia even tighter. Then she let out a short bark of laughter. "He said his friends at the base think we're both MILFs."

"Oh really?" she said with a smirk. She leaned back and brushed away Natalia's tears. "Well, I'm the only one who has that particular privilege and I'll fight off a whole battalion of GIs if I have to for you."

Natalia rolled her eyes and Olivia knew her tasteless joke had succeeded. "How did the meeting go?" Natalia asked.

"All right, I think," she answered. "Ava's crunching the numbers and will have a report to us by Monday. We'll be able to make a decision next week."

Natalia nodded. "Sounds good." Then with a sigh she said, "What are we going to do about Ava?"

"Ava?" Olivia asked and raised her eyebrows. "You mean about this morning? If I recall correctly, Leyla started it."

"Yeah, but she was just pulling Ava's chain; Ava was the one who got aggressive."

"Aggressive?" Olivia asked, releasing Natalia and taking a step back. "My daughter was just defending herself. Leyla was the one who instigated the whole thing."

"She may have started it *today*, but Ava is the one who takes everything my sister says out of proportion," Natalia said and held up a hand as she tried to explain. "That's how my family always was when I was growing up so I'm sure it was the same for Leyla, even though I wasn't

there. I remember my mother and aunties working in the kitchen on Sundays going on and on about one thing or another. It *sounded* like they were fighting, but it was just a way to show who was boss at the moment. Actually, they all knew they were equals."

"Oh, so what you're saying is that Ava is disrespecting you and your sister's cultural upbringing?"

"Oh, my God! You are so not getting the point. I'm saying that the more aggressive Ava is, the harder Leyla is going to push. If Ava would just lighten up and laugh a bit at her, then Leyla would back off." Natalia ran her fingers through her hair in frustration.

"That doesn't make any sense," Olivia said, waving her arms.

"Maybe not in those words, but it was how we were raised. To us in the family, it was okay to talk trash to and about each other, but if anyone *outside* the family said the exact same thing, everyone stood together. Look at you and me, for example. Once you gave in, we started getting along so much better."

"So everything would be hunky dory if Ava just rolled over, bared her neck and acknowledged Leyla is the alpha bitch? Isn't that what I did with you, Natalia?" Olivia had her hands on her hips and her head tilted to the side, but her defensive posture let Natalia know she had to choose her words very carefully.

"No!" Natalia said. "I'm talking about the moment you stopped treating me like a rival or a subordinate and finally accepted me as your equal and let me help you. But *we're* not the point here; it's Ava and Leyla and their constant fighting."

"Oh, so you agree it's not just Ava anymore?"

Natalia sighed and rubbed her face. "Olivia...I think that what Leyla does is harmless – that in some subconscious way she's trying to help Ava because Ava is a part of her family. But what Ava does is destructive and I think it's going to keep getting worse."

"God, I can't believe this!" Olivia cried. "Ava is fine; she's just a little abrasive. She's just...she's just my daughter, okay?"

"Exactly!" Natalia said, pointing at her. "And look at all the ways you tried to self-destruct in the past."

Olivia stared at her partner. "You think I'm going to self-destruct again?" she asked quietly. "Do you have a time table for this, because I sure would like to know."

"No, Olivia!" Natalia said. "You've changed. I've watched you grow and become the wonderful and beautiful woman you are today. You're not going to self-destruct. But something's going on with Ava and I think she needs our help." She reached toward her, but Olivia pulled quickly away.

Olivia could hear Ava's voice from this morning in her mind accusing her of taking sides and she hardened her expression. "Just tell that sister of yours to quit the head games and leave my daughter alone." Turning her back, she strode quickly out of the office, leaving Natalia alone.

Sitting alone in her office, Eleni Andros sighed in frustration as she ran her hands through her long hair. Sitting in front of her on her desk were two piles of case files. Both of them were cases where DeSilva appeared to have tampered with evidence, either by falsifying records, or by losing or 'accidentally' contaminating samples. However, it was the larger pile of folders that concerned her the most. On all of them, her daughter had been the lead investigator.

She sighed again. It was time to speak with Frank, and it definitely wasn't a conversation she was looking forward to.

Natalia sat in a quiet corner of the Beacon's day care center as she nursed Francesca. Leyla sat at her small desk nearby bottle-feeding the infant boy of a nice couple staying at the hotel who were out making funeral arrangements for the woman's father who had passed away. The couple had been so relieved they wouldn't have to worry about the baby while they completed their difficult arrangements. Natalia smiled. The service the Beacon was providing would eventually more than pay for the added expense. As word got around, business would pick up. And extending the service to the staff had already proved to decrease absenteeism. She thought about the many times Rafe had needed to stay home from school and she had been forced to miss work if she couldn't find a sitter.

A stray thought made her chuckle. Leyla looked up and asked, "What?"

"Oh nothing." She smiled. Francesca finished feeding, so she shifted the baby to her shoulder. "Just thinking. I was marveling at how I went from being a maid in this hotel to becoming part owner."

Leyla laughed. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you slept your way to the top."

"Just the opposite," Natalia laughed along with her sister. "My refusing to sleep with Alan drove him crazy. He even said in his will that dying was the only way he could get me to take anything from him."

"Emma and Rafe's grandfather?" Leyla asked. "What was he like?"

"A tyrant," Natalia said. "Manipulative, diabolical, power-hungry. No wonder Olivia married him." She laughed at the thought. "But in the end he finally got it."

"Got what?"

"The real meaning of family," she answered. "How your family is the most important part of your life. Not money or power or fame. Olivia learned that lesson, too. Nicky got it from his adopted parents, which is why he was so torn when Rafe and I showed up in town. He wanted to take care of us, but it got in the way of his marriage."

Leyla thought for a moment. "I remember him...your Nicky," she said.

"You do?" Natalia said surprised. "You were so young."

"Yeah, I do. You must have been babysitting me and he was visiting. He brought me an ice cream from the street truck and sat on the fire escape to smoke."

"That was Nicky all right," Natalia said. "He didn't want to get me in trouble by smoking inside or doing anything to let the folks know I had visitors." She was silent as she thought about her first love. "I hated that I was responsible for the breakup of his marriage, but it was all part of God's plan."

Leyla blinked. "You really believe that?"

"Of course," she answered. "If I hadn't married Nicky, Olivia would probably not be here today and we wouldn't have the family we have."

"I wish I had that kind of faith," Leyla sighed. "I'm glad you two have each other and you're right, your family is amazing."

"*Our* family, *hermana*," she pointed out with a kind smile, but remembering her conversation with Olivia earlier, the smile turned into a frown. "Do me a favor, please? Take it easy on Ava. She's a good woman, but she's got a short temper. Every time you push her buttons, she's going to blow up and we don't need the headache."

Leyla's jaw clenched. "She takes herself too seriously," she said. "And she thinks she's a big deal just because she's Olivia's daughter."

"That's not true," Natalia countered. "She hasn't had an easy time of it and her relationship with Olivia wasn't always the best. And losing a baby is always hard on someone."

"She lost a baby?" Leyla asked, her hard tone of voice turning surprised. "I didn't know that."

Natalia nodded. "A son, Max," she said. "That's why she left Springfield for a while. It was too hard seeing Remy, the father, all the time and being reminded of her loss."

"Remy the cop?" Leyla asked. "The one whose wife just had a baby?"

"He's the one," Natalia said and looked down at Francesca who had fallen asleep. She gently placed the baby in a nearby crib and adjusted her blouse. "All right, I've got to get to my meeting with Blake. Everything okay here?"

"Yeah," Leyla answered. "This one's down for the count and it'll be quiet here until the older kids get off the bus."

"Okay, Leyla. Then I'll see you later." She gave her daughter and sister a kiss and left the center after a passing glance at Leyla's thoughtful expression.

Blake Marler pulled another manuscript from her tote bag and handed it to Natalia. They were seated at a table at Towers. Coffee cups and the remains of a light snack were pushed aside to make room for the various projects they were working on.

"I'm really not sure about this one," Blake said as she showed the cover letter to Natalia. "It's good and I think it's well-written, but I'm not sure if it will sell. It's not like anything out there."

"Sometimes that's an advantage," Natalia said, glancing over the paper. "I mean, you can only have so many vampire or apocalypse novels out there at the same time. Being a maverick can sometimes be a good thing."

"See, that's why I like working with you, Natalia," Blake said. "You're not afraid to take chances."

Natalia laughed. "That's what Olivia always says, but I think I've just been lucky."

"Still, you have a good feel for books." Blake reached into her tote again and pulled out an envelope. "That reminds me. This is for you."

Natalia's face scrunched in confusion as she opened the envelope and her expression turned to surprise as she pulled out a check. "Blake, what's this? I told you I didn't want to take any money simply for reading books. I enjoy working with you."

"That's just a small percentage of the profits on the books you've recommended. They're selling like hot cakes and that never would have happened without your contribution." Blake smiled. "Be proud of yourself, Natalia. You've got a gift and should be compensated for it."

Natalia's eyes goggled. "This is a *small* percentage?"

"Yes," Blake said with a laugh. "I've always been lucky that way as well, but your work has helped increase that luck. So take the money; put it in the kids' college fund if you want, but I insist."

"All right," Natalia said reluctantly as she tucked the check into her purse, then she asked, "If the publishing company is doing so well, why do you keep waitressing at Company?"

"Oh, I'd miss being in the center of things," she said, leaning back in her chair. "I really enjoy interacting with people. If I didn't go there every day and simply worked from home or an office, then I'd miss out on what's going on around town. And on seeing some of my favorite people every day like you and Olivia and...Doris."

"Okay, I can see that," Natalia said with a nod. "I did feel a little isolated after Francesca's birth. I love our home and our daughters, but I'm glad to be working again."

"Right," Blake said and squirmed a little in her chair. "So, um...that reminds me. Natalia? Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, Blake," Natalia answered and picked up her cup to drain the rest of her coffee.

"How do you make love to a woman?"

Natalia choked and her cup clattered to the table. A waitress immediately came over and started to wipe up the spilled coffee before it could stain the manuscripts on the table. Natalia glanced around and noticed several patrons of the restaurant looking on. Finally, when the waitress left, Natalia said, "Blake! Whu...what?"

"You have right?" Blake asked, seemingly unaware of Natalia's embarrassment. "I mean, sure you have."

"Blake!" she exclaimed again. She looked around, but was relieved to note that the other people in the restaurant weren't paying attention anymore.

"Oh come on, Natalia! Everyone here knows you and Olivia are lovers. Heck, half of the people here were at Phillip's New Year's party when you two were going at it in the library."

"Oh, my God," she said, covering her face with her hands.

"You're not ashamed of it, are you?" Blake asked, blinking at Natalia and shaking her head.

"No!" she said loudly and then lowered her voice. "No, of course not. It's just...Blake, I'm not used to talking about it outside of the bedroom."

"You mean you never talked about sex with your girlfriends?" Blake goggled.

"I never really had time for girlfriends before Olivia," she answered. "And even if I hadn't been entirely cut off from my family, Leyla was still a kid and I couldn't have talked to her about that kind of stuff."

"Well, Olivia doesn't count anymore and Leyla is your sister," Blake said. "We're friends, right?" She waited for Natalia to nod. "And you're gay and I really, really need advice on how to seduce a woman."

Natalia simply stared at the woman sitting across the table from her.

"Please!" Blake whined.

Natalia closed her eyes and sighed. "Okay, okay!" she said. "I assume we're talking about Doris Wolfe here?"

Blake exaggerated her nod. "Yes! See, that's the thing. At least with you and Olivia neither of you knew what you were doing so it didn't matter if it wasn't good. But Doris has a lot of experience, so she's going to want someone who knows what she's doing."

Natalia frowned. "Okay, first of all, Blake...Olivia and I...our first time was good," she said her cheeks hot with embarrassment.

"Really?" Blake asked, surprised.

"Really," she answered. "It was very, very good and you want to know why?"

Blake leaned forward. "Why?"

"Because Olivia and I love each other," she said softly. "It didn't matter that we had never made love with another woman before or how much experience we had in regards to sex. All that mattered was that we are so in love that the ability to show that love physically made it totally mind-blowing. It was that way our first time and every other time since."

"Wow," Blake said with a long exhalation of air as she sat back in her chair.

Natalia gave her a stern look. "But Blake...if you're just looking for a new experience then go pick up a random woman down at Ladies Night. Doris has been hurt enough and if you're not serious about her and she ends up hurt again, then you'll not only have Olivia on your back, but me as well. Got it?"

Blake raised her hands defensively. "Got it," she said with an emphatic nod. She leaned forward again and gave Natalia a wicked grin. "So tell me, were you icked out the first time you...you know...to Olivia?"

"Oh, my God," Natalia said and dropped her head to the table.

In room 217 of Cedars, Lillian Cooper made a small adjustment to the I.V. of the comatose patient. She took a long look at his pale and gaunt face and tilted her head in thought. Picking up

her pen, she made a note in the case file lying on the rolling table. 'Patient's color seems improved,' she wrote, and she initialed it and added the time. Closing the file, she exited the room.

A few seconds after the door had swung silently shut behind her, Edmund Winslow's eyes sprang wide open.

Act Two

Buzz Cooper paused in the middle of unlocking the door to his restaurant and turned at the sound of screaming sirens. He stepped to the edge of the street and watched as two SPD squad cars raced into the entrance to Cedars Hospital. Moments later, he saw his son's car pull in behind them. He frowned as first Frank and then Detective Li exited the vehicle and ran towards the entrance.

"Oh boy," he muttered under his breath and hurried to get inside so he could call his wife.

The scene on the second floor was utter chaos when Frank stepped off the elevator. He paused for a moment to take in the scene, but as Anna rushed past him, he hurried to catch up.

His stepmother was standing near the nurse's station with her arms wrapped around her torso and her face drawn.

"Lillian, are you all right?" he asked, touching her on the arm.

She nodded. "I'm fine, Frank," she said. She turned aside as her telephone began to buzz. "It's your pop," she said, thumbing the device. "I'll call him back later."

Frank turned to his officer and barked, "What's going on, Mahoney?"

"Call came in to dispatch at 6:02 am," the man answered. Frank glanced at his watch and noted it was now 6:15. Good, but not good enough. He nodded for the officer to continue. "Mrs. Cooper here says she found Officer Hooks unconscious outside of Winslow's room and Winslow gone. Hooks is in the ER right now with Doctor Bauer."

Frank turned to Lillian. "What happened?"

"I had just come back from my break and found the officer outside room 217 slumped over," she said. "I checked him and found him unresponsive and with a weak pulse. I called the code and opened the door to check on the patient and noted that the bed was empty. I didn't go inside the room."

"No one's been in the room since?" Anna asked.

Lillian shook her head and Anna got on her phone.

"How's Hooks?" Frank asked.

Lillian shrugged and Frank said, "Mahoney..." He jerked his head toward the emergency room, then turned to Anna. "I want a lockdown on the hospital, now! Get everyone you can down here and I want every inch of this place searched." He turned back to Lillian. "You saw Winslow last night?" he asked. "What was his condition?"

Lillian pulled a file from its slot and opened it. "I checked him when I came on duty at 8:00 pm. Officer Hooks was already here and in his usual place outside the door. I did my examination, checked his vitals and made sure his IV was working. I did make a note that his color looked a little better, but other than that he seemed the same as he's been since coming out of surgery."

"Did you see anyone go in or out other than Hooks?" Frank asked.

"No," she shook her head.

"Who else was on duty last night?"

"Dr. Donofrio was on the overnight and Rick relieved her at 6," she answered. "Maria was the other nurse, but she was covering the ER. And Billy Tai was here."

"Tai?" Frank asked, not recognizing the name.

"The floor orderly," she answered. "He's new."

Frank looked at Anna and noted her suspicious expression as she met his gaze. "Where is he now?"

Lillian frowned. "He should still be on duty."

"Get him here," he said.

Lillian walked over to the nurses' station to make the page while Frank moved closer to Anna, who was just clicking off her phone. "Well?" he asked.

"Marina's downstairs and organizing the search; she's got the exits and loading bay all blocked off. Remy's searching the grounds. Eleni's on her way and should be here any minute now. She was still on the road."

The elevator opened and Officer Mahoney and Rick Bauer walked toward them. Frank felt his stomach drop when he saw Rick's face.

"Oh no," Lillian said, placing her hand over her mouth.

"I'm sorry," the doctor told Frank. "By the time we got to him, his heart had already stopped and we weren't able to resuscitate him."

"God damn it!" Frank exclaimed, thinking about Hooks who always eagerly volunteered for extra guard duty because his son was studying abroad and the extra cash was a big help. "What killed him?" he asked Rick.

Rick shrugged. "Not sure yet; we'll need a postmortem, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's some kind of poison."

The elevator doors opened again, this time revealing Eleni, who was carrying her large evidence kit. Anna quickly briefed her and Eleni turned sorrowful eyes to Frank. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Just find out anything you can so we know just what the hell happened here," he said before he left to help with the search.

In the kitchen, Natalia heard the sound of her lover's voice a moment before Olivia pushed through the door, her cell phone pressed against her ear. She could immediately tell from Olivia's expression that something was seriously wrong. She turned off the faucet and grabbed a towel to dry her hands.

"Okay, Anna," Olivia said and caught Natalia's eyes with her own. "Yes, I'll call Ava right away. No, I was going in, but Natalia was going to stay home with the kids today...help them get ready for Halloween."

Natalia frowned. From what Olivia was saying about the sudden change of their plans, she did not care for the direction the conversation was going.

"Yes, I think that's best too," Olivia continued. "Okay, thanks for calling, Anna, and I appreciate all the extra help." She sighed and thumbed her phone shut and then looked at Natalia. "Edmund escaped from the hospital this morning. The officer guarding him is dead."

Natalia gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh no!"

"Anna's sending a security team here to pick us up and take us to the Beacon, just for tonight," Olivia said, putting a hand to her temple. Natalia immediately moved to the cabinet to retrieve a couple of headache tablets from the bottle she always kept there. "Thank you," Olivia said as she took the pills. "She said that it'll be easier to keep watch over everyone at the Beacon while she gets all the security details set up, but we'll have full protection 24/7 regardless of where we are. Oh, and Anna said she'll come with us tomorrow night so the girls don't have to miss trick or treating."

"All right," Natalia said and bit her lip. "God, I *hate* this!"

"I'm sorry," Olivia said, biting her lip.

Natalia frowned. "What are you sorry for?" she asked. "You're not responsible for Edmund's actions."

"Well, maybe if I hadn't pissed him off so many times he wouldn't be after my family now," she said with a wry shrug.

"You've taken responsibility for your past mistakes, Olivia," she said. "And most importantly, you didn't let the need for revenge consume you, like Edmund has."

"It could have," Olivia said with a shrug. "I wanted to ruin Jeffrey when I found out he was Ava's father."

"But you didn't," Natalia pointed out as she shook her head. "You found forgiveness in your heart and I love you all the more for it. So stop feeling guilty about Edmund's actions. Yes, he lost his daughter and that's a terrible thing, but it will never excuse what he's done since...the harm he's caused and the many lives he's taken. All of that is on Edmund, not on you or anyone else. Him."

"Thank you," Olivia smiled, wiping a tear from her eye. "I'll go get Emma and Francesca ready to go. I'm sorry that your day is ruined."

"Again with the apologies," Natalia said with a roll of her eyes. "I'll just take a guard with me when I run out for the girls' costumes. They can spend the day with Leyla."

As if summoned by the sound of her name, Natalia's sister walked in. "Who can spend the day with me?" she asked.

"Do you mind working today?" Olivia asked her.

"No, why? What's going on?"

"I'll explain," Natalia said. "Olivia, please go get the girls."

Olivia nodded and went to fetch their daughters.

Doris Wolfe looked up at the knock on her open office door. "Come in, Eleni," she said and waved at the chair in front of her desk. "Anything new on Winslow?"

"Nothing," Eleni replied. "As soon as the search warrant comes through for the orderly's house, I'll get going on that."

"Then what's up?" she asked.

Eleni paused and then reached over to push the office door closed. Doris's eyebrows rose questioningly as Eleni leaned forward and said, "Doris, I think someone inside the department is working with Winslow."

Doris pursed her lips. "Go on."

"I'm certain DeSilva was and had been for years. I have evidence that he helped Winslow fake his own death. I'm also sure that someone else in the department was working with DeSilva. And last night, the security system was bypassed by someone using the PD override. Those codes were only changed last week and the hospital security staff doesn't have access to them. It had to have been someone with the department." Doris noted that during her speech, Eleni's hands were clenching in nervousness.

"Have you spoken to Frank about this?" she asked, trying to keep her face neutral.

"Not yet," Eleni answered. "Frank doesn't *want* there to be a dirty cop in his department, so he refuses to listen."

"He'll listen this time," Doris said grimly. "One of our officers is dead and if someone inside the department helped Winslow escape, they're an accessory to murder. You get all of your evidence together and I'll call a meeting for this afternoon."

Eleni nodded. "Thank you for listening, Doris."

"I wish I could say it's been a pleasure, but it hasn't."

Sometime later that morning, Frank met with Anna in Edmund's room, which was now stripped and showed the signs of Eleni's work.

"All right," he said. "What happened?"

Anna crossed her arms. "Sometime after Hooks came on duty last night, the orderly brought him dinner from Company."

"Company?" he barked.

"Marina said she always sends over dinner for whoever is on guard duty," Anna said, wincing at his sharp tone. "Sometimes she sends it with the regular delivery boy but if he's busy, she's been sending it over with Tai, who always stops in for coffee before his shift."

"So then Tai poisoned the food?" Frank asked, unable to wait for her to continue.

Anna sighed. "The ME won't know for sure until the lab results come in, but he strongly suspects that's what happened. Hooks's major systems just shut down one by one until he died. He thinks it might have been cyanide."

"Bastard!" Frank exclaimed. "And what did Eleni find?"

"Nothing," Anna said. "The room has been swept clean. Not even Lillian's prints are left. It was a professional wash."

"Witnesses?"

"None," she said. "So what I figure happened was this – Hooks and Lillian came on duty around eight o'clock. Tai picked up his coffee and Hooks's dinner at eight forty-five and clocked in at nine. He delivered the poisoned meal to Hooks and started to work. Sometime between then and six o'clock, Winslow either got up and walked out of his room or someone – either Tai or another accomplice – bundled him up and carted him out of here."

She continued, checking her notes. "They must have gone through the loading dock. I checked the security tapes, but they're also wiped clean. Nothing during the eight hour period from ten pm to six this morning. Like I said, a professional job."

"What do we have on Tai?" he asked and took the personnel file she handed him.

"He started at Cedars three months ago and has been working the graveyard shift all this time," she said. "Performance review last week was satisfactory. Lillian said he was quiet and seemed shy. Kept to himself, but did his work well. She never had any complaints."

"Did you try his address?" he asked, shuffling through the file.

"I sent an officer over, but there was no response to the knock and no car in the driveway. I spoke with the owner of the house and she said she'll meet us there to let us in. Remy's waiting on the search warrant and will bring it over when it's signed," she answered.

"All right, let's go," he said and left the room.

On the drive over, Anna briefed him on the other details she had been handling, including contacting Phillip Spaulding's security firm and arranging extra coverage.

"I managed to catch Olivia and Natalia before they left the farmhouse and they agreed to wait for the escort. Reva and Jonathan with Colin and Sarah are going over to the Beacon. It will be easy enough to protect the kids at the new day care center."

"Agreed," Frank said then added, "I do think it's a colossal waste of time and money though. Winslow's probably already back in Mexico by now."

"I don't think so, Chief," Anna said, blowing out a puff of air and shaking her head. "Winslow wants one thing – to get revenge on his enemies. And if they're in Springfield, that's where he's going to be."

"That makes no sense," he said, shaking his head. "Why risk getting captured again? Or shot again, for that matter?"

"It doesn't have to make sense to us," she said and Frank resented her conciliatory tone of voice. "It does to him and that's what we have to deal with."

Frank was silent as he considered the fact that his youngest daughter once again needed a *bodyguard*. Christ, how the hell had that happened? He felt a strong jab of resentment at Olivia Spencer and her place in his daughter's life. No matter how much Natalia claimed Olivia had changed, it was still her past actions that were now endangering Francesca. Of course, Natalia had made herself Winslow's enemy by taking a shot at him, but then again that never would have happened if not for Olivia. For the first time he regretted allowing them full custody and wondered if it was too late to do something about it.

Anna pulled into the driveway of a small house. She parked the car behind a blue sedan as a woman of about fifty stepped out of it.

"Detective Li?" she asked.

Anna nodded. "Mrs. Johnston...Chief Cooper."

"Ma'am," Frank said. "Thank you for meeting us."

"It's no trouble," she said. "As I mentioned to Detective Li, Mr. Tai is a monthly tenant. He pays in cash promptly on the first of the month."

"He's lived here for three months now?" he asked.

The woman nodded as she stepped onto the porch and unlocked the door. "He's very quiet. As far as I know, he hasn't had any visitors. No complaints from the neighbors."

"Please wait here," Frank said and he and Anna entered, hands on their gun butts.

The room was simply furnished with old seventies-style furniture, complete with a dark brown shag carpet. A faint odor of stale cigarettes filled the air; the overflowing ashtray added its own fragrance to the miasma. Anna quickly moved down the hall to inspect the small bathroom and bedroom.

In the kitchen, the remains of coagulated bacon fat filled a frying pan on the grease-spattered stove. The sink was full of dishes obviously days old. Frank pulled open the refrigerator to find only a jug of water and an old takeout box from Company.

Back in the living area, he noticed an odd device on the table next to a tattered La-Z-Boy. He picked it up and was examining it when Anna returned.

"Anything?" he asked, not looking up. When she didn't answer right away, he glanced over at her and saw she was staring at what was in his hand.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, her voice leaden.

He nodded at the table. "Right there," he said. "Why? It's a hand gripper."

"Yes," Anna said. "And it's my father's. I told you before about it."

"How can you know that?" he asked. "There must be one of these in every other house in town, so how can you be so sure it's his? Just because he sent you that one before doesn't mean anything, Li."

"I *know* it's his, Chief. I've never seen him without one," she explained. "All the time I was growing up, I'd hear the sound of him working these. A constant squeak, squeak, squeak. Day and night. It never ended." Frank could see goose bumps raising the short hairs on her arms. "Sometimes I still hear the sound in my nightmares."

"But why did he have such an obsession?" Frank asked.

"He always said that he would never be caught without his deadliest weapons," Anna answered. "Guns can misfire, knives can break, but he could always kill with his hands."

"Oh come on!" Frank scoffed.

"Try it," she challenged.

Frank held the grip in his left hand and squeezed. It didn't budge. He switched it to his right hand and was only able to move it a millimeter. "Jesus," he exclaimed.

"Exactly," she said, and then gave him a sarcastic grin. "By the way, Chief...don't worry about any latent prints on that. Like I said, I *know* they're my father's and that he's here in Springfield helping Edmund Winslow."

Frank Cooper slammed down the telephone and yelled, "Eleni! Get in here!"

His ex-wife entered his office, followed quickly by Anna Li. "What's wrong, Frank?"

"You tell me!" he said, standing and leaning his weight on the desk with his palms on the desk. "I just got off the phone with Doris Wolfe."

"Okay..." she started.

"Okay? Okay? I'm sorry, but you going to Doris Wolfe with baseless accusations of a dirty cop inside the department is *not* okay!"

"Frank," Eleni said and then shut the door. "Listen to me carefully. DeSilva was dirty and I'm sure he was working with someone else."

"You're *sure*?" he scoffed. "But you don't have any hard evidence."

"I'm getting it," she said. "Look..." She spread out some papers from the files Frank figured she was not letting out of her sight. "DeSilva was the forensic investigator, but in a lot of these cases, he could not have blown the case without the cooperation of one of the police investigators handling them."

Anna looked over the paperwork and nodded. "It's true that he'd have needed help, but it could have been any officer in the department, not just the investigating officers."

"Exactly!" Frank said. "And that's still not proof. DeSilva had a lot of access to the cases. He *was* a member of the police department, you know."

"Yes, but he's been gone for a while and yet someone inside the department disabled the hospital's security system last night," Eleni said.

Frank stared at her. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

She nodded back at him, her face very serious. "Yes, Frank, I do."

"And Doris Wolfe knows all this?"

"Yes, Frank," she answered.

"God damn it, Eleni!" he said. "This is the same kind of wild speculation that Harley was doing when she thought Gus was dirty. And look where that led – an injured DA and a young boy in prison."

"Chief, you can't just turn a blind eye to this," Anna said.

"Stay out of this Li," he snarled and then turned back to Eleni. "And you keep your mouth shut to Doris Wolfe." He pushed past the women and stormed out of the office.

The daycare center was busier than during Francesca's feeding, but Leyla enjoyed the hectic pace. She loved working with the children and was so happy and grateful she had this opportunity. She especially loved that she got to spend time with her nieces. Even though Rafe

was only five years younger than her, she regretted that she'd missed out on sharing his childhood or being his 'big aunt' as they grew up. Now at least she had the chance to be a part of Emma and Francesca's lives.

She admitted to herself that she missed Chicago and the excitement of the city and her friends. She also missed her parents, once again wishing they would join the twenty-first century. Natalia had learned to be flexible in her thinking and it had rewarded her with a wonderful family as well as letting her maintain her faith. She only wished their parents would be a little less rigid as well. Then maybe they too would find their lives enriched.

Leyla was changing Francesca's diaper when Greg entered the room. She smiled as Emma, spotting the thin man, ran over to speak with him. By now, Leyla had observed many of the hotel's employees interacting with the owners' daughter. While many of them treated the girl with saccharine sweetness as a way to suck up to her parents, Greg always treated her as an intelligent young lady and never spoke down to her, which was why he was one of Emma's favorite people.

She finished with Francesca and set her back in her playpen. The little girl immediately grabbed one of her plastic blocks and stuffed it in her mouth. Leyla smiled and then went over to join Emma and Greg.

"Hey Leyla," Greg said in greeting. "I've got a window before my next meeting so I thought you might like a break," he offered.

Leyla glanced down at Emma, "What do you say, Em? Think you and Greg here can keep this place from falling down?"

Emma nodded and grabbed Greg's hand. "Come on; let me show you the new moves Anna taught me."

Greg, having been on the receiving end of one too many of Emma's 'moves' before, gave her a sickly grin in reply.

Leyla laughed and left the daycare center to take her break. She felt a small twinge of discomfort as she passed the security guard standing alert by the entrance to the center. The news that Edmund Winslow had disappeared from the hospital had been on everyone's lips.

The Beacon's employee break room was a small room located on the first floor next to the elevator banks. Greg had told her that Olivia had gotten tired of guest complaints about the noise from the elevator machinery, so she had simply converted it into a space for employees to spend their breaks. The bed had been removed and a refrigerator added. A couple of old tables and chairs and a dresser that had suffered at the hands of some drunken college boys gave the staff room to rest and relax.

She nodded a greeting at Maria, one of the housekeepers, and poured herself a cup of coffee. She took it over to the table and sat down with the most current issue of *Runway*. The quiet of the break room was interrupted by the door crashing open, and a second later Ava walked through.

Leyla glanced up from the magazine but remembering Natalia's request from the previous day, she lowered her eyes again to the page. From the corner of her eye, she watched Ava as she got a carton of yogurt from the fridge and grabbed a plastic spoon. Rather than sitting down, she leaned against the dresser to eat her snack, blatantly staring at Leyla.

Finally, Leyla slammed her magazine on the table and snapped, "What?" She noticed that Maria had buried her nose in her book.

Ava shrugged. "Nothing. Why? Got a guilty conscience or something?"

"I've done nothing to you or anyone else for that matter," Leyla defended herself.

"No?" Ava asked and tilted her head. "Why did you come to Springfield?"

"To be with my family," she answered.

"You have a family in Chicago," Ava pointed out.

"I do," she agreed. "But I've missed out on so much of Natalia and Rafe's lives. I don't want to miss out on all of you now."

Ava ignored Leyla's inclusion of her in the generalization. "What about your parents? They're getting older; won't they need you?"

"My parents are none of your business," she growled.

"No?" Ava asked again in that infuriating tone of voice. "Yet you come to Springfield, insert yourself into *my* family and start causing trouble."

"Causing trouble?" Leyla felt the beginnings of a headache start to flare up behind her eyes. "Oh that's rich! Is that what you call me saving your sorry ass from a mass murderer? Trouble?"

"I mean with my mother and Natalia," Ava said calmly as she ignored Leyla's questions. "They have a lot on their plate right now. Emma acting out, a growing baby, a son in the war and a madman out for revenge against them. They don't need another headache."

"What about you?" she hissed. "If you're so concerned about them, why don't you go back to San Francisco? You cause more worry for them, especially since you continue to ignore simple security precautions."

"I'm not..."

Leyla refused to let her continue. "In fact, I'd say that your behavior indicates a strong tendency towards self-destruction. Why, Ava? What's eating you up?"

Ava growled, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really?" Leyla said with a small smirk, feeling victorious for finally making Ava squirm. "I think you do. I think you left Springfield for San Francisco to run away from your guilt about your baby and coming back here has brought all of that back."

Ava's face turned red. "You bitch! You have no freaking right! You don't know anything about Max and you don't know anything about *me*."

"I know something is up with you and I think Remy's new baby is making it worse." She paused as she noted Ava's flushed face and realized she had gone too far. "Look, Ava, I just want to help you. After all, I *am* your aunt."

"You're nothing!" Ava seethed. "And if you know what's good for you, you'll get out of Springfield and go crawling back to Mommy and Daddy." Ava threw the yogurt container in the trash with such force that white cream and bits of peaches went flying. She stormed out of the break room without a backward glance.

Leyla sighed and looked at Maria. "Sorry about that," she said softly.

Maria shook her head and continued to read her book.

Passing Keira's empty desk, Ava heard the sound of her mother's angry voice coming from behind the closed inner office door. She paused when she recognized her own name and then Natalia's. She realized that her mom was talking to Natalia and muttered a curse under her breath as she guessed that Leyla must have gone crying to her sister after their little encounter in the break room.

Moving closer, she tried to listen, but with the door closed it was difficult, though she did hear the sound of the telephone handset slamming against its holder. She waited a few more moments and then knocked on the door.

"Come in," Olivia called out and looked up as Ava entered. Ava noted her flushed face and the deepened lines around her eyes which was always an indication that her mother was getting overstressed.

"Oh, Ava," Olivia said and nodded at the folder she was carrying. "Is that the quarterly housekeeping budget?"

"Yes," Ava said and handed it over. "Mom, were you fighting with Natalia?"

Olivia looked up from the report. "What? Oh, no, honey. We're not fighting. You know us – we can get into some pretty heated discussions. Been that way since nearly the day we met."

"Mom..."

Olivia held up a hand to stop her from continuing. "No, seriously, honey, thanks for the report. It's Saturday, so why don't you take the rest of the day off. Just make sure you don't go off alone. It's not safe."

"I'm not afraid of Edmund Winslow or his goons," she said with a pout.

"Well, *I* am," Olivia said and Ava noted the vein throbbing in her temple. "Will we see you tomorrow night?"

"Sure, I'll drop by," she replied. "I don't want to miss my baby sister's first Halloween."

"That's great, honey," Olivia said and came around the desk and hugged her daughter. "We'll see you then. In the meantime, enjoy your day."

"Okay, Mom." When Olivia turned to go back to work, Ava said, "Mom? I'll make this better. I promise."

Olivia paused and then sighed. "I just want you to be happy, Ava."

"I want that for you too, Mom," she answered, feeling a lump in her throat. Of all the people who knew Olivia Spencer, she was one of the few who knew just how desperately Olivia had fought for happiness. Now that she had finally won it, Ava was not going to let anyone ruin it for her. "You *and* Natalia both deserve all the happiness you can get. Don't worry. I'll fix this." With that she turned and left the office, ignoring Olivia's worried look.

Back in her office, Ava thought for a moment and then picked up her phone. "Hi...Cyrus?" she said into the handset. "Yeah, I was wondering if we could talk this afternoon...no, in person. How about the park?" She paused. "Okay, great. See you then."

She hung up the phone and looked at it thoughtfully. "Yeah, Mom," she whispered to herself. "I'll fix her just for you."

Act Three

"Marina!" Chief Frank Cooper called out as he exited his office while simultaneously donning his jacket. His daughter entered the receiving area a moment later. Frank looked around and noted that no one else was nearby, but he lowered his voice regardless. "Listen, I need you to do me a favor."

"What is it, Dad?" Marina asked.

Frank looked around again. "I don't want to get into specifics, but evidence is turning up that there may be a dirty cop in the department."

"What?" Marina exclaimed, her face turning white. "No, that's...that's not possible."

"I don't believe it either," he said, "but I need you to keep your eyes and ears open for anything that might be going on in the department. Can you do that?"

Marina stared at him. "I...I guess I can, but Dad..."

"No, I really need your help on this, Marina," he said. "I will *not* have my tenure as chief of police be sullied by charges of corruption. Remember what happened when Harley started saying Gus was dirty?"

"Well...he was," Marina pointed out.

Frank waved it off. "Yes, but it was for altruistic reasons and even then it turned into a major mess. If Edmund Winslow is involved, you can bet no one will brush it off and a lot of heads will roll. This is serious."

"All right, Dad. I'll keep an eye out," Marina said. "Where are you going?"

"Mayor's office," he growled. "Doris wants to meet to discuss this so-called 'evidence'."

"Oh..." she said wanly. "Well, good luck."

"Thanks, baby," he said and quickly left the office, leaving Marina staring after him.

Ava paced briskly up and down the jogging path as she waited for Cyrus to arrive. She glanced at her watch for what felt like the hundredth time. Finally, she heard someone approaching and looked up to see the young Australian.

"It's about time," she grouched.

He leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Glad to know I can still keep a pretty girl waiting," he joked. "So where's the fire, luv?"

"Do you know Leyla Rivera?" she asked.

"Hmm," he said, scratching his chin in thought. "Natalia's baby sister, right? I've seen her around Company a few times. Lovely little Sheila."

"Maybe on the outside, but she's really a trouble-causing bitch," Ava said.

"Really, now?" Cyrus commented. "Hadn't heard that bit of gossip yet. I take it you're the one she's causing trouble for?"

Ava shook her head. "For my mother," she answered. "Leyla's trying to ruin my mother's happiness and I won't allow that to happen."

"I like your spunk, mate," he said. "But what does all that have to do with me?"

"I'm sure you wouldn't need much imagination to figure out a way to get Leyla to scamper back to Chicago where she belongs," she said softly.

Cyrus scratched his chin again. "No, not much imagination, that's for sure, but, see, there's one little problem, luv."

"What's that?"

"Not in that business anymore," he said with a wry grin. "Walking the straight and narrow these days."

"Oh come on!" Ava exclaimed waving her arms in frustration. "Once in that business, *always* in that business. I know how it works, Cyrus. So how much do you want?"

"Nothing, luv," he answered, shaking his head. "Look, it's not that I'm against making some extra moolah, but my lady wouldn't care for me getting it in that manner, so while I appreciate the offer, I'm going to have to say no."

"Your lady?" she asked.

"Mel Boudreau." He grinned. "You know her...lawyer type, which might sound a bit contradictory, but she's also the honorable type, so if I want to remain in her affections – and I do – that means I must say no."

"She wouldn't have to know," Ava pointed out.

"Ah, but things like that have a way of coming to light in a town like Springfield."

"Boy, you really are whipped," Ava said, shaking her head.

Cyrus laughed. "Maybe so, luv, but only in the best possible way." He leaned in and kissed her cheek again. "Ta, Ava. Good luck with that problem of yours."

"Cyrus..."

"Gotta run!" He waved and headed back down the path.

"God damn it!" she cursed, watching his retreating back.

In the City Hall conference room, the chief of police and Detective Li sat across from the mayor at a table covered in boxes of evidence and case files. Eleni Andros was standing at the white board she had covered in diagrams and case information.

"Well, that's what we have so far, Madame Mayor," she said, placing the cap on the dry-erase marker. She took a seat between Frank and Anna.

"Call me Doris, please; we can bypass the formalities here," Doris said as she made a few more notes on the yellow legal pad in front of her. "All right, then," she said and looked up. "I'll have the assistant DA prepare arrest warrants for DeSilva and Tai. We hadn't issued a warrant for Winslow yet, since he was unconscious. We'll go ahead and assume that Winslow is awake and issue the warrant now, as well as one for your father, Detective. What is his full name again?"

Anna answered, "Hung Feng Li."

"Thank you," Doris said, writing the information down. "Since both Edmund and his henchman are foreign nationals, I'll also make sure they can't slip under the radar by claiming diplomatic immunity.

"Is that possible?" Frank asked.

Doris gave him a scornful glance over the frames of her glasses. "The U.S. government takes a dim view of foreigners murdering its citizens en masse, Frank, no matter what their religion or politics might be. Winslow is the former head of state of an island nation. You don't want to take a chance he can escape justice because of that, do you?"

Frank clenched his jaw at her tone and shifted in his seat, but Doris sensed he would refrain from answering.

"Now," Doris continued. "As for Eleni's theory that someone inside the department is working with Winslow and since Detective Li agrees with the evidence supporting it..."

"Oh come on, Doris!" Frank protested. "You can't believe that there's a dirty cop on the force. DeSilva sure, but I *know* my officers."

"Nevertheless, we need to be absolutely sure. I will not have this going on," Doris said, sitting back and tossing her glasses onto the table. "Your force already puts the Keystone Kops to shame for the wedding massacre and now it seems that the prime suspect just got up and walked out from under your nose. Should I have let you explain to the governor how that happened when he called me today to chew my ass off?"

"One of my men is dead," Frank growled.

"Exactly, which means if someone inside the department is helping Winslow it makes them an accessory to murder." She paused to see if Frank was going to say anything further, but when he remained silent, she continued. "I want the three of you to coordinate the investigation, with Detective Li leading the team."

"Now wait a minute," Frank sputtered. "I'm the chief!"

"Precisely, Frank," Doris said. "You have a department to run. Besides, Anna is fairly new here and less prone toward favoritism. I trust her to remain fair and not fly off the handle."

Frank muttered under his breath and Eleni glanced sharply at him, a blush rising across her face.

"What was that, Frank?" Doris asked.

"Nothing," he grumbled.

Doris paused to stare at him until he squirmed in his chair again. After a quick glance at Anna, who tightened her lips together, Doris looked back at her notes.

"All right," she said, putting her glasses on again. "Finally, I am hiring an outside agency..." Frank opened his mouth to protest, but Doris overrode him before he could, "...run by A.J. Mallet. I'm sure you don't have any objections to *him*, do you Frank?"

"Just that you might not want to involve outsiders, even if it is Mallet," he said.

"Be glad for the compromise, Frank," she said. "The governor wanted to send an Internal Affairs investigator from the state police."

Frank frowned, but kept silent.

"Good," Doris nodded. "Again, Anna, I want you to liaise with Mallet. Contact him as soon as you can. Any questions?"

Anna shook her head and Doris turned to Eleni. "The governor has authorized that any laboratory work you need done will be expedited. Let me know if you have any problems. Any questions?"

"No, but thank you, Doris," Eleni said also shaking her head in reply.

"Frank? Anything else?"

Frank took a deep breath. "Just that this whole thing stinks, Doris."

"I agree," she said and leaned back in her chair. "I have eight dead constituents, a dead cop and a traitor in my police force, so yeah, the whole thing stinks." She leaned forward. "I promise you, Frank, someone is going down for this if it's the last thing I do as mayor. Heads will roll and I intend that Edmund Winslow's will be the first one. Understood?"

"Yeah," Frank said.

"Thank you for coming," Doris said and stood up. "Anna, can you stay a moment?"

"No problem," she answered and Frank glanced sharply at her, but stood, turned, and left the room without even waiting for Eleni.

The forensic scientist also stood and held out her hand for Doris to shake. "Thank you again for listening, Doris."

Doris nodded. "Just make sure your evidence is rock solid, Eleni," she said. "Not only for me, but for all the citizens of Springfield who are counting on bringing Winslow and his cohorts to justice."

Eleni nodded and left the room.

When the conference room door closed behind Eleni, Anna looked at Doris, who had retaken her seat. The mayor closed her eyes and rubbed her aching temples.

"Are you all right?" Anna asked.

Doris waved off the concern. She opened her eyes and looked at Anna. "I need you to keep an eye on Mallet," she said. "Yeah, he's working for himself now, but he's got a lot of close ties to the people he's going to be investigating. The same goes for Frank and Eleni."

"You don't suspect..."

"No," Doris said. "But I can't take any chances. Like I said, you're practically an outsider yourself and are not related or had any relationships with anyone in the department."

"Except you," Anna pointed out.

"Despite what Frank Cooper thinks, I *can* remain impartial where you're concerned," Doris said.

"Ah." Anna smiled. "Caught that, did you?"

"There's little I miss," Doris said smiling back at Anna. "Oh, and Anna..."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about your father," Doris said. "Even if you are estranged from him, it must be difficult for you."

"Don't be sorry, Doris," Anna said, shaking her head. "I will be very happy the day that man is locked up for good."

Doris nodded. "Very well. Then please, do all you can to help stop this nightmare. No matter what, I'm counting on you."

"Thank you, Doris," Anna said. "That means a lot to me."

"Please, can you send Brandon in on your way out?"

"Sure," Anna said. "Enjoy your evening, Doris."

"I will if this hellish day will ever end," Doris said with a wry smirk.

Greg handed Olivia a final invoice to sign. After quickly scanning it and making sure the figures added up correctly, she added her signature to it. She paused a moment as a stray thought occurred to her. Not once during all of her many marriages had she considered changing her business name. She had always been Olivia Spencer, a name colleagues respected and competitors feared. Now, for the first time, she considered adding Natalia's name to her own, not only for their private lives, which they already used to some extent, but also for their business partnership.

Olivia Spencer-Rivera, she imagined signing official documents and seeing Natalia Spencer-Rivera next to it. She smiled at the image and felt a strong swell of love in her heart for the woman who had given her so much and she was suddenly anxious to get home despite the current friction between them.

"Here you go, Greg," she said, handing the invoice back to him. "Are you all set for the party tomorrow night?"

Greg's face lit up. The First Annual Halloween Extravaganza to benefit the Springfield LGBT Resource and Community Center had been his idea. Olivia and Natalia had liked his proposal and put him in charge and so far they were impressed with his performance.

"All the arrangements are finalized, the food and liquor arrived on time today and my team is ready to decorate the ballroom first thing in the morning, so we'll be ready to go."

"Good," Olivia said and thought for a moment. "You projected 75% occupancy for tonight and 80% tomorrow. How's it going?"

"Reservations as of this morning were at 70%. I checked with the desk earlier and we're at 82% full with walk-ins arriving all the time. Reservations stand at 76% tomorrow night, but with today's walk-ins staying over, we're already at 89% and I expect we'll be booked solid. I called Towers and told them to expect our overflow."

Olivia sat back, impressed. Halloween had never been a big draw for business before, but with it falling on the weekend this year and Greg's little extravaganza, their profits had taken a huge jump. "Very good, Greg," she said with a warm smile for her employee. "Make sure you get the numbers to me as early as possible next week so we can get a check over to the center. I'll speak with Natalia about adding our personal contribution."

"Thank you so much, Ms. Spencer," he said, standing up and leaning over the desk to shake her hand. "Not only for all you and Ms. Rivera are doing for the community, but for giving me this opportunity."

"It was a great idea, Greg," she said, squeezing his hand. "Good for business and good for the community. A win/win for everyone. Now, make sure you don't work too hard and enjoy yourself. Did you finally decide on a costume?"

"Well, it was a tossup between Cher and Lady GaGa," he laughed. "But Lady G won."

Olivia's eyes widened. "Oh God, not that awful meat thing?"

"Noooo!" he chuckled. "The ballroom is going be rocking with bubbles tomorrow night."

She laughed and shook her head. "Just make sure it's standing and intact Monday morning."

"It will be," he said. "Enjoy your Halloween and I expect to see lots of pictures of the girls."

"I promise. Have a good night, Greg," she said as he left. Her cell phone skittered on the desk with an incoming message. It was from Natalia, asking her to pick up some milk on her way home. She tossed her phone on the desk and started to pack up her briefcase, ready to leave.

A short time later at the mini-mart she had just grabbed a carton of organic milk when she heard someone call her name. Turning, she found a smiling Cyrus Foley approaching her.

"Hi there," she said.

"Evenin,' luv," he said. "Listen, I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but I have a bad feeling about it. Ava rang me up earlier, asking me to meet her in the park."

"Oh?" Olivia said, getting a bad feeling. "What did she want?"

"Well..." Cyrus said as he rubbed a hand against his neck. "She wanted me to take care of a small problem for her."

"Let me guess," Olivia said with a groan. "The problem's name is Leyla?"

"Got it in one, luv," he said pointing a finger at her. "Nothing drastic, mind, just something to 'scare' her into running home to Mummy and Daddy, but I have a feeling you're a lady who knows how these things can get out of control."

"Gee thanks," Olivia said dryly. "But so does Ava. You turned her down, I hope."

"Course I did," he answered with a wry grin. "But like I said, thought you should know in case she finds another less scrupulous bloke."

Olivia nodded. "Thanks, Cyrus," she said. "I owe you one."

"Nah," he said. "Just take care of your girl so she doesn't get in trouble."

"I will. Thanks again."

"Ta, luv," he said and left the store. Olivia reached for her cell phone to call her daughter and then muttered "Damn!" when she realized she had left it at the Beacon. She started to head to the register to pay for the milk, but then detoured to the cut flowers display. Ava could wait until tomorrow. Right now, she owed her lover a big apology.

Olivia nodded at the security guard standing at his post on the porch of the farmhouse. "Are you alone, Kyle?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, Ms. Spencer. Jenkins is also on duty with me. He's patrolling the grounds." He held up his walkie-talkie.

"Anything you guys need, just knock. Okay?" she said.

"We'll be fine, ma'am," he said with a smile and pointed to a large cooler sitting on the bench. "Ms. Rivera fixed drinks and sandwiches for us."

Olivia nodded with a smile, once again reminded of just how big her lover's heart was. "All right then, Kyle. You boys have a good night."

"Enjoy your evening, Ms. Spencer," he said.

Olivia entered the house, surprised to find it quiet. The living room was lit only by glow from the fireplace. She placed her purse and briefcase on the end table and walked through to the kitchen, taking the bouquet of flowers and the carton of milk with her. The kitchen was empty, but she noticed the table was set for two with a bottle of wine already breathing and candles ready to be lit. She had just put the milk away in the refrigerator when she heard Natalia's footsteps descending the stairs.

As Natalia entered the kitchen, Olivia noted the hesitant grin gracing her lips.

"I'm tired of arguing with you," Natalia said.

Olivia smiled. "Me too," she said and offered the bouquet. "And you were right. Something *is* going on with Ava so I owe you a big apology."

Natalia paused a moment to smell the flowers and then asked, "What happened?"

"Can we talk about it later?" she asked with a sigh. "I'm too tired right now to even think about it."

"All right," Natalia agreed and went for a vase. "Go wash up. Supper's almost ready."

"Where are the kids and Leyla?"

"Cross Creek," Natalia answered. "Reva volunteered her house for a pre-Halloween slumber party for all the kids. Leyla went to help chaperone. I spoke with Anna and she organized the security detail so Cross Creek is locked up tighter than Fort Knox tonight."

Olivia chuckled at the thought of Reva shut in with a crowd of screaming children hyped up on candy and immediately felt better. "So it's just us for dinner?"

Natalia gave her a slow smile complete with sexy dimples. "Just us for the entire night."

Olivia matched her smile. "Wonderful."

After a quick shower, Olivia changed into a pair of light linen slacks and a matching tank top. She put her hair in a ponytail and added a few light touches of makeup and a dab of Natalia's favorite perfume. Glancing at her reflection in the bedroom mirror, she smiled at the look of anticipation in her eyes. She frowned at the thought of Ava, but then she firmly pushed it out of her mind. Tonight was for making up with her partner, who had obviously had the same idea. Olivia vowed that no worries about children, businesses or homicidal royal maniacs would invade her mind. It was time to focus completely on the one who deserved it the most.

"Will you need me for anything else tonight, Madame Mayor?" Brandon asked, poking his head into Doris's office.

"No, thank you, Brandon," she answered. "I've had a hellish day and I plan to go straight home and relax. I suggest you do the same."

He was about to reply when Doris's cell phone announced an incoming text message. She glanced at it and raised her eyebrows. "From Olivia, asking me to meet her in a bit."

"Shall I call her for you?" he asked.

"No, that's all right," she said, shaking her head. "It's flagged nine one one, so I'll just run over to see what she needs on my way home. Goodnight, Brandon."

"Goodnight, Madame Mayor," he responded.

"So then he says to the woman, 'My mommy would look much prettier in that dress than you! You're too fat for it anyway.' I thought I'd die of embarrassment on the spot."

Olivia snorted with laughter at the image of a five-year-old Rafe facing down an angry customer so his mother could buy a second-hand dress.

"Oh God," she said, wiping her eyes. "Even then he was fighting for his mother."

"Oh yes," Natalia said, leaning forward and taking her wineglass from the coffee table. She moved back on the couch, snuggling even closer to Olivia. "You should have seen us on ninety-nine cents day at the thrift store on Western Avenue. We made quite a team."

"Ninety-nine cents?"

"Clothes with a certain color tag were sold for ninety-nine cents each. Rafe and I would buy as much as we could afford and then sell them at the flea market for five dollars apiece. At the thrift store, Rafe would race around finding the best clothes with the sale tag on them, sometimes even snatching them out of people's buggies if he thought I wasn't looking. I always pretended not to see him, but I tried to subtly remind him about it before he went to confession. I hated letting him get away with it, but we really needed all the extra cash we could get."

"Sam used to work the straw market on the weekends on San Cristobel," Olivia said, remembering. "When I'd get home from the restaurant, we'd spend all night making pasties for him to sell the next day to tourists. That extra cash was what saved our behinds on quite a few occasions."

Natalia nodded. "You know, I never really thought about it before, but I think that's where I got my pushiness that you're so fond of."

"From haggling in the flea market?" Olivia asked.

"Yes," she answered. "I was always so shy growing up, but having Rafe forced me to change whether I wanted to or not. And if I hadn't, we'd never have survived."

"Which is yet another reason I admire you so much," Olivia said with a smile. "And you're not 'pushy;' you're a superhero, remember?"

"Well, you're biased," Natalia said, her smile accentuating her dimples.

"Ya think so?"

"I *know* so," Natalia laughed.

Unable to resist those dimples a second longer, Olivia turned to kiss first one then the other and then finally Natalia's wine-sweet lips.

"Mmm," Natalia hummed contentedly.

"I agree," Olivia whispered and plucked Natalia's glass out of her hand so she could push Natalia against the couch. Natalia lay back and gave her a delighted grin as Olivia stretched out on top of her.

"Oh, that's divine," Natalia said, then captured Olivia's lips as she wrapped her arms around Olivia.

Olivia deepened the kiss, enjoying the warmth of Natalia's mouth. She loved her lover's taste and smell. She especially loved breathing Natalia in and the way she felt underneath her. "Oh baby," she mumbled against her partner's mouth, not wanting to break contact. "I love the way you taste."

"Mmm," Natalia hummed again and Olivia could feel her smiling. "You're pretty tasty yourself."

"Thank you," Olivia said with her own smile. She spent a few leisurely minutes just enjoying kissing Natalia, but needing more she began to slide her hand underneath Natalia's top. To her surprise, she was stopped.

"What?" she asked lifting herself up a bit.

"Not here," Natalia said and Olivia shivered at the low tone that told her Natalia was extremely aroused.

"What's wrong with here?" Olivia asked, nibbling on Natalia's neck.

"Nothing's wrong with here," Natalia said. "Here is good. In fact, I *love* here, but not when there are two security guards right outside the windows."

Olivia paused and met Natalia's eyes. "Good point. Let's go."

"Right," Natalia said and allowed Olivia to help her off the couch.

"Come on, beautiful," Olivia said and led Natalia up the stairs, leaving the last embers in the fireplace to die out on their own.

Once Olivia closed the door behind them, Natalia leaned in for a searing kiss. Olivia moaned as Natalia eased away. Her lover smiled at her and said in a low voice that Olivia could feel deep within her, "Get out of those clothes and in bed. I'll be right back."

"When did you get so bossy?" Olivia asked and was delighted by Natalia's mischievous smirk.

"You complaining?" she shot back saucily.

"No," Olivia leaned forward to kiss her again and whispered against her lips, "I like it."

"So quit your bitching," Natalia laughed and headed for the bathroom.

Olivia watched her disappear behind the door, enjoying the way Natalia's backside swayed seductively from side to side. She lit a vanilla scented candle and quickly pulled off her clothes, leaving them on the vanity chair to take care of later. She shut off the lights and pulled back the bedspread. She was finally settling against some pillows cushioning the headboard when the bathroom door opened and her lover stepped out.

She stopped breathing as Natalia approached the bed. Natalia was entirely nude and her flawless olive skin glowed in the light of the candle. She stopped at the edge of the bed and looked at Olivia, who could feel her lover's eyes tracing her from head to toe, pausing to linger in appreciation over certain aspects of her anatomy that caused a faint blush to grace Olivia's cheeks.

"Enjoying the view?" she asked.

Natalia nodded and licked her lips as she met Olivia's eyes. "You're so beautiful," she said.

"Come here." Olivia held out a hand and Natalia took it in her own. She placed one knee on the bed and pushed herself up until she was straddling Olivia's legs. With a happy sigh, Olivia wrapped her arms around Natalia's waist.

"Not too heavy, am I?" Natalia asked.

"Never," Olivia said. "I love you on top of me."

"Yeah?" Natalia husked as she leaned in and began kissing Olivia's face. "Just on top?"

"Oh no," she answered in a whisper. She threw her head back to give Natalia access to her neck. "I love you underneath me and when we're pressed close together side by side. And I especially love it when I can drink from you at the same time you're drinking from me."

"Mmm." Natalia smiled against her skin. "I especially love that, too."

"I love all the ways we make love," Olivia admitted, moving her hands around so she could caress Natalia's bountiful breasts. Natalia arched closer into the touch. "And I love you more and more every time we make love."

"I do, too," Natalia said and pulled back to look into her eyes. "You are so very precious to me, Olivia. You fill me up so much. In every way."

"I know, baby," she said.

"Fill me up now, Olivia," Natalia whispered hotly in her ear.

"All right," she answered and slid her hand around to caress along the outside of Natalia's thigh. Olivia felt her lover shift eagerly above her as she ran her hand up the inside until her fingers brushed against damp curls. Moving further, she parted Natalia's slit with her middle finger and groaned in appreciation at the silky wetness she encountered. "Oh, that's nice, Natalia. Is that all for me?"

"All yours, Olivia," she said and watched with hooded eyes as Olivia removed her hand and brought it to Natalia's mouth, slowly painting her slightly opened lips with her own essence. When she was done, Natalia leaned in to kiss her, her taste commingling in their mouths. Natalia breathed out hotly, "Inside me, please. Now, *querida*."

She had never been able to deny her love anything and certainly not when Natalia had such need in her voice. She slid her fingers once again through Natalia's wetness and without hesitation plunged two fingers deep inside.

Natalia arched her back presenting Olivia with the tempting invitation of her breasts. She lowered her head and greedily sucked Natalia's nipple into her opened mouth, pulling Natalia closer as her lover began to ride her fingers.

Natalia scratched her fingernails along Olivia's scalp, the sting making Olivia even more aroused. She turned her attention to Natalia's other breast as she gripped Natalia's back, feeling the sweat begin to pool in the hollow of her spine. She gave Natalia's breast a final lick and then leaned her head back to look at her love.

As often as she got to see it, the sight of Natalia Rivera luxuriating in the joy of their passion never ceased to take her breath away. Natalia's head was tilted back to expose her sensual neck, her mouth open with her shuddering breaths and her pulse point throbbing in sync with the rhythm of her hips. Olivia spread her own legs to open Natalia up more to her and then she slipped a third finger inside, feeling the slick walls grip her tightly yet release an additional gush of moisture to accommodate her.

Olivia looked into Natalia's eyes, the normal brown nearly black with desire. "My love," Natalia whispered. "Oh God, Olivia. I love you so much."

"Natalia." She said her lover's name like a benediction, a soulful supplication to whatever Power had delivered this magnificent creature into her arms. "Natalia," she repeated.

Natalia's pace increased and Olivia ignored her now aching arm muscles as she began to move in sync with her beautiful soulmate. She leaned forward to capture Natalia's panting lips with her own, her open mouth wanting, needing to take all of Natalia in. Natalia tightened her arms around Olivia's back as if she were clutching a life preserver. Olivia tightened her own arm around Natalia's back, reassuring her partner.

"I've got you, baby," she murmured against Natalia's heated skin. "I won't let go."

"Olivia," Natalia sighed and then repeated the name again, this time louder, and then louder still as Olivia felt her walls begin to clench tightly around her fingers as Natalia approached her release. With a final cry of Olivia's name that could probably be heard for a mile, Natalia's body stiffened and then relaxed infinite moments later.

Olivia was trembling with the need for her own release and she realized Natalia was aware of that when her partner slid off of her fingers and moved Olivia so she was lying on her back. Olivia embraced her in a full body clutch and rolled them over. She spread her legs and rolled her hips forward so that she could grind against Natalia's center.

"Oh fuck," she croaked out, the sensation nearly overwhelming her.

"That's it, baby," Natalia said. "Give it to me."

"Yes!" Olivia felt her orgasm build up as she continued to thrust against her lover. She felt Natalia's nails digging into her back as she came again and the bite pushed her over the edge. With her cry "Natalia" still echoing in the room, she collapsed her spent body on top of her partner.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

"Mmmhmm," Natalia agreed.

"Not too heavy, am I?" Olivia asked.

"Never."

Olivia sighed in utter happiness.

Doris noted the parking lot at Ladies Night was filled to capacity. Inside, the bar was dark, smoky and full of women, just the way she liked it. She made her way over to the counter and waited for the bartender to come over. After a few minutes, she did and greeted Doris.

"Hey there, D!" she said. "The usual?"

"Yeah, Sal, thanks," Doris replied. "Wow, what a crowd."

"Ain't it great," Sal said. "Lots of lovely ladies from out of town for that big bash over at the Beacon tomorrow night."

"Fantastic," Doris said with a big grin. Olivia had mentioned the event a few weeks ago along with her hopes of bringing in some much needed business to Springfield. "Speaking of Olivia... have you seen her? She's meeting me here."

"Not yet, but if I do, I'll let her know you're here."

"Thanks, hon," Doris said, taking her drink and looking around the room for an empty table, wondering when her friend would show up.

The Beacon's bar and lounge was doing a brisk business when Ava walked in. All of the tables were filled to capacity with a few single guests eating and drinking at the bar. She sat down heavily and closed her eyes as she rubbed her temples, trying to rein in her throbbing headache.

"Can I get you some aspirin, Ms. Peralta?" the bartender asked.

"Please, John," she groaned. "And a scotch and soda to wash it down with."

"Right away," he said.

"Tough day?" a voice asked from beside her.

Ava turned to find a smiling man sitting next to her. She noted he was dressed in khaki slacks and a pressed button-down shirt. His face was average, but still attractive with warm brown eyes and perfectly styled brown hair. He looked, in other words, like just another young executive in town on business.

"Something like that," she finally answered.

"Anything I can help with?" he asked with what he probably thought was a charming smile, but Ava saw right through it. Nevertheless, she instantly decided he would make a perfect distraction. She shifted a fraction closer to him, her body language morphing from tired to sultry in a heartbeat.

"Perhaps you can, Mr...?"

"May. Steve May," he answered, his own body language answering hers. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Peralta."

"Ava," she purred. "Are you in Springfield on business, Steve?"

He shook his head. "Just passing through," he said. "On my way back to my regular territory."

"Perfect." She smiled. A salesman and one not likely to wander back here again.

"And you?" he asked. "Let me guess...you're an actress starring as Lady Macbeth with a traveling theatre group?"

Ava threw back her head and laughed. "Hardly," she answered, still chuckling. "No, I live and work right here."

"In Springfield?"

"In the Beacon," she answered. "Family-owned business."

His eyebrows rose, impressed. "Very nice," he said. "Makes for a very brief commute."

"It does," she agreed, sipping her drink and enjoying the warmth sliding down her throat. She was suddenly eager for some other warmth as well. "Would you like to see my suite?"

Steve's smile grew exponentially. "Sure," he answered.

Ava nodded and took her drink and purse with her as she stood. "Come on."

Doris had finally found an empty table and was simply watching the crowd as she sipped her Manhattan.

"Yoo hoo! Doris," she heard and looked around. Her mouth dropped open when she saw Blake approaching.

"Blake?" she asked and was surprised when her friend sat down next to her after setting a drink on the table. Her surprise turned to shock when Blake leaned over and kissed her. And not a simple 'hello friend' kiss either. Blake's lips lingered on hers, causing Doris's head to swim as her senses were bombarded with the woman's smell and taste. Finally, Blake pulled back and Doris could only stare dumbly at her.

"Hey there," Blake said as if she hadn't just kissed her friend senseless. "Sorry I'm late."

Doris sat there stunned as she watched Blake looking around the room. Finally, she gathered her wits and said, "Um, I'm meeting Olivia. She should be here any minute."

Blake turned back to Doris and shook her head. "Oh, no she won't. I sent you that text," she said.

Doris's mouth dropped open again. "You tricked me?"

"No!" Blake protested. "No...well, maybe...I mean, I simply used Olivia's phone, that's all."

"What?" Doris said. "Does *she* know that?"

"Well...no," Blake admitted. "But really, Doris, I've been trying to get you to go out with me for weeks now. I never realized how hard it is to ask someone out on a date."

"Blake," Doris sighed. "We've been over this..."

"Look, Doris," Blake interrupted. "You gave Anna a second chance...don't I at least deserve a first chance?"

Doris paused in thought. She would love nothing more than to jump headfirst into a relationship with Blake. She had certainly fantasized about it on long, lonely nights sitting at home, but the thought of putting her heart out there again only to be stomped on was terrifying. "Nothing's going to happen, Blake," she said, shaking her head.

Blake gave her a wide smile and said, "We'll see."

Doris rolled her eyes.

Blake held the look for a few seconds more and then looked around the crowded club again. "So, this is the famous Ladies Night?" she said then craned her neck to peer into the corner. "Is that Sister Anne?"

Act Four

Natalia loved this part. Actually, she loved all the parts, but after their intimacy, she especially loved the feel of their bodies pressed together, the sweat cooling over satiated flesh with Olivia still half-lying on top of her. She ran her hand over the nearly invisible line bisecting Olivia's chest and then moved up to her neck where she felt the comforting, strong beat as Olivia's heart rate returned to normal. She sighed in contentment, once again thanking God for the incredible gift of her love's continued good health.

"You're amazing," she mumbled, snuggling impossibly closer to her partner. She felt Olivia's chuckle against her fingers and smiled. "I know I say that a lot, but it's true."

"Thank you," Olivia said and squeezed her tighter. "I happen to think you're pretty amazing yourself."

"Thank you," Natalia echoed. "So is our entire family."

"I know," Olivia said and Natalia heard the subtle sadness in her lover's voice.

"Want to tell me what happened?" she asked, instinctively sensing that Olivia was ready to talk about Ava.

Briefly, Olivia outlined her earlier encounter with Cyrus Foley. "I don't know what the hell Ava is thinking. She, more than anyone, knows how dangerous that sort of thing is," she concluded. "Even if she only intended to scare Leyla away, she damn well knows just how easily Leyla could get hurt if anything went wrong."

Natalia pushed herself up so she could see Olivia's face. "She's *not* thinking, my love," she said. "I know you got angry before, but I don't think it's Leyla who's causing this, she's just the focal point for whatever is bothering Ava."

"Any idea what that might be?" Olivia asked, eyeing her. "She seems to have settled back in Springfield just fine, despite all the craziness that's been going on. And her work at the Beacon has been exemplary. I couldn't be prouder."

"Leyla said that during their argument at the Beacon, Ava really flew off the handle when she mentioned Max," Natalia started, but before she could continue, she felt Olivia stiffen.

"What the hell is she doing bringing him up to Ava?" Olivia's eyes flashed angrily.

"I know, I know," Natalia soothed, caressing Olivia's arm. "I said the same thing to her, but don't you think Ava's reaction does raise some big red flags?" Natalia stopped there, giving Olivia time to process her words. She rested her hand on Olivia's chest, feeling the deep breaths, and knowing them as a sign that her lover was trying to control her emotions.

"It does," Olivia finally admitted. "I worried that seeing Remy's new son would cause her problems. I guess it has."

"What about you, my love?" Natalia asked and when Olivia quirked an eyebrow at her, she continued. "He was your first grandchild. I know it probably hurts you as much as it does Ava."

Olivia stared at the ceiling and then took a deep breath as Natalia wiped the lone tear that ran down her lover's cheek. "I've spoken to Felicia about it," Olivia said, faintly. "She said that when you lose a child there are many reminders of it and each one will hurt as much as it did in the beginning, but eventually you adapt. It's one way we learn to deal with grief."

"I'm sorry for both you and Ava...and Remy, too," Natalia said, earnestly. "I wish Max was a part of our family now, but he's not because God needed him more than we do. But there will be more grandchildren, Olivia. Max will always be our first, but we'll have more and we'll tell them about him and how much love he had in his life, because you and Ava have so much love inside you."

Tears were flowing freely down Olivia's cheeks now and she took a deep breath that was nearly a sob. "Thank you," she said, turning to Natalia. "Thank you for loving me and for loving my children."

"You don't have to thank me, *querida*," Natalia said, giving her a deep kiss. "Loving you is so, so easy. I can't imagine *not* loving you and your children. I love them as much as I do my own, just as you love mine."

"I do," Olivia said, wiping away the last of her tears. "Even when Rafe hated me, I loved him because he was yours. And my Sweet Pea? She is as much my daughter as Ava and Emma. I could not love her any more than I already do."

"Then see...we'll be all right. Our family can and *will* get through anything life throws at us. As long as we're together, we can't fail. So much love means we have so much strength. We can do anything."

"You think so?"

"I *know* so," Natalia said with a mischievous grin. "Do superheroes ever lie?"

Olivia laughed. "No. No they don't."

The living room of Cross Creek cabin was filled with children of various ages and states of consciousness. *Toy Story 3* was playing on the big screen television as Clarissa and Emma watched avidly. Sarah was nodding off and both Henry and Colin were fast asleep. Francesca was also out like a light and sprawled across her sister and Clarissa's laps.

Leyla Rivera quietly crept over to them and lifted up the slumbering toddler.

"Thanks, Aunt Leyla," Emma whispered. "My legs were falling asleep."

"You're welcome, sweetie," she replied and carried her niece into the den which served as a refuge for the adults. Josh and Jonathan were there, both holding beer bottles.

"Reva go to sleep?" she asked, setting Francesca down and grabbing the diaper bag.

Josh nodded tiredly. "I finally convinced her nothing was going to happen tonight, not with that army outside."

"Why don't you go join her?" Leyla said. "Most of the rug rats are down and the rest of them will be asleep soon."

"You sure?" he asked.

"Yeah, man, go ahead," Jonathan said. "I'm sure they'll all be up at the crack of dawn, ready to start the fun all over again."

Josh groaned in an exaggerated fashion. "All right," he agreed. "But next time Reva gets another bright idea like this, please call Ravenwood immediately."

Leyla laughed as she finished changing Francesca who had barely stirred.

Jonathan followed her back to the living room as Josh continued to the bedroom. Leyla settled her niece in the big playpen next to Colin and Henry. After she covered them with a blanket, she glanced around to make sure everything was fine.

"Want a beer?" Jonathan asked softly.

She nodded and headed back to the den where she settled in a recliner with a tired sigh.

"Here you go." Jonathan handed her an opened bottle, which she took gratefully and downed a long drink.

"Oh, that's so good," she sighed again, finally feeling her body relax after the long day.

Jonathan flopped on the couch and rested his feet on the table in front of it, drinking from his own bottle. "Oh yeah," he agreed, letting out a soft belch. He looked at her. "You're really good with the kids."

"Thanks," she said. "Lots of babysitting during and after high school to pay for college." She smiled at him. "And you're really good with Sarah."

He smiled. "Yeah, well it was just the two of us for a long time, so we're very close. I am glad she finally has a chance to get to know her extended family, as crazy as it might be."

Leyla laughed. "I know. Just trying to keep track of who is related to who and how is tough. When you add in past marriages, then things get really confusing."

"Throw in my Auntie O's relationships and it can get really crazy," he said, joining in the laughter.

"Are we related?" she asked, motioning between them with the hand holding her beer. "Seeing as how your aunt is my soon-to-be sister-in-law."

He thought for a moment. "Nope," he finally said. "We're only related through adoption, but if we were then you'd be my aunt."

"Ooh, and that would make Sarah my great-niece!"

"I don't think she'd mind," he said. "She likes you."

"Really?" Leyla asked, skeptically. "She barely says two words to me."

"See...that's how I know she likes you," he laughed. "If she didn't, she wouldn't say anything."

"All right, if you say so," she laughed.

They both paused to take a drink. "So," he finally said. "I take it your move to this one-horse town is permanent?"

"I think so," she answered. "My friend Mario going to college at Urbana-Champaign so there's nobody waiting for me back in Chitown, except the parentals and Natalia and I are not feeling the love from them at the moment."

"They'll come around," he said and Leyla laughed.

"I don't think so," she said, shaking her head. "They went nearly twenty years without speaking to Natalia because she had a child out of wedlock. Now that she's in a gay relationship...? Forget about it."

"Man, I just don't get people," he said, putting his empty bottle on the table. "Any fool can see she and Auntie O are meant for each other."

"I know, right?" She threw up her hands, and then sat back with a pout. "Last time I saw him, Papa said I was forbidden to visit Natalia and her family."

"Why?" he asked, his brow scrunched.

Leyla leaned back against the couch and closed her eyes. "He said he didn't want me exposed to degenerates, especially Olivia." Leyla felt tears burning behind her closed eyelids. "He said she would corrupt me just the way she corrupted Natalia."

"Oh man, that's harsh," he said. "So that's why you left?"

"Pretty much," she said bitterly. "They robbed me of my sister for most of my life; I didn't want to miss out on any more. Especially given the wonderful family she's made with Olivia." She paused for a moment. "Well, with one really big exception," she added.

Jonathan's eyebrows rose. "Got a problem with my cousin, I'm guessing."

"Big time," she answered, feeling the familiar ire rise within her at the mere thought of the tall brunette. "I just don't get her. She's got so much and she's always grubbing for more."

"That comes from being an orphan," he said.

She looked at him. "Last I heard, Olivia and Jeffrey were alive and kicking. In fact, if I know my sis, she and Olivia are taking advantage of that big, old, empty farmhouse right now."

Jonathan laughed. "Yeah, no doubt. But what I meant was that her adoptive parents are gone, like mine. It's a big slap of reality when you lose the love and support system which you've relied on your whole life. Something shifts inside and sometimes people deal with it by overcompensating. Maybe that's what you're seeing in Ava."

"Maybe." Leyla shrugged. "I just don't want her to cause trouble for Natalia and Olivia or the kids."

"I don't think she will," he said. "She's as fanatical about family as Auntie O is and that's saying a lot. Just give her a chance, Leyla."

Leyla shrugged again doubtfully. "We'll see," she finally answered.

"Good enough." he smiled. "So...no one is pining away for one Leyla Rivera in the Windy City? What about the rest of the world?"

Leyla threw back her head and laughed heartily.

Several empty glasses and a nearly-empty basket of cheese fries littered the table that Doris and Blake were sitting at. The crowd in the bar had thinned a bit, but it was still more than was usual at this time at night, Doris knew. She turned back to her companion, who she finally noted had moved her chair closer to Doris so she was practically sitting on the mayor's lap. Doris shook her head in amusement and nearly missed what Blake was saying to her.

"Dance with me?"

Doris blinked in surprise. "Umm..."

"Please?" Blake nearly whined, which was so cute that it caused Doris's heart to skip a beat. "I've been thinking about dancing with you for a long time."

"Really?" Doris asked. She had long fantasized what a relationship with the other woman would be like, but she had never considered that Blake might have done the same.

"Yes, really!" Blake emphasized. "How many times do I have to tell you this is not something new for me? I've thought about you for a really long time. Come on. Dance with me."

Blake stood and pulled a bemused Doris to her feet. She led the mayor by the hand to the dance floor and then turned around. Doris smiled gently as her friend seemed to hesitate, but then her heart leapt in her chest as Blake stepped forward and took her in her arms. She stiffened for a

moment, but then relaxed and returned the comforting embrace as they began to slowly move to the music.

"Oh..." Blake sighed. "You feel so good."

Doris closed her eyes and allowed herself a moment to enjoy the sensation of the redhead's body pressed intimately against her own, but then the familiar fear came crashing back. "Blake..." she began.

"Shh... just relax, Doris," Blake urged and snuggled closer. "Let yourself go for just a little bit. Okay?"

Doris paused. "All right," she finally said and tightened her grip. *Just for now*, she promised herself. *Just this one dance*.

Blake smiled, laid her head on Doris's shoulder and sighed in contentment.

Leyla was just about to ask Jonathan if he wanted another beer, when they heard a commotion coming from the living room. Their eyes met for a moment, and then they both jumped up at the same time and rushed out of the den.

Emma and Clarissa were standing next to the couch, both tugging on a DVD case.

"No, gimme!" Emma cried loudly and yanked the case away from Clarissa. Her momentum propelled her back against the couch and into the lamp sitting on the end table. The lamp teetered for a moment, and then fell over with a very loud crash.

The two sleeping boys immediately woke up, but Leyla was glad to see that Francesca and Sarah barely stirred. However, a few moments later, both Reva and Josh came stumbling into the living room, their faces creased with sleep.

"What's going on?" Reva croaked.

"I'm sorry," Emma said. She tried to pick up the pieces of the lamp, but Josh intercepted her.

"Don't touch the glass, honey," he said and carefully began to clean up the shards.

"What were you two fighting about?" Leyla asked.

"Nothing," Emma said with a pout, avoiding her aunt's piercing gaze.

"Clarissa?" Reva asked.

The young girl shrugged. "Really, nothing," she answered. "Emma wanted to watch that movie and I wanted to watch another."

"So you were fighting about it?" Leyla asked. "Emma, I'm surprised at you."

Emma mumbled something under her breath.

"What was that?" Leyla asked.

"I said, I don't care!" Emma yelled, and this time both Francesca and Sarah woke up, the former with a very loud cry of protest.

Leyla sighed. "Okay, into the den with you, Emma," she ordered. "You sleep in there. Movie time is over."

Emma pushed past the adults and other children and stomped her way down the hall. A moment later, the door to the den slammed shut.

"I'm sorry, Reva," Leyla said, moving to soothe Francesca back to sleep. "You two go back to bed; Jonathan and I can handle this."

"Don't worry about it, hon," Reva said, waving off the apology. "These things happen. I didn't like that nasty old lamp anyway."

"Regardless, I'll make sure she apologizes to you both in the morning," Leyla said and turned a piercing look on Clarissa.

"I'm sorry, Reva," the young girl said. "I'm sorry, Josh. Sorry Leyla."

"Thank you, sweetie," Reva said for all of them. "Okay then, come on, big guy...let's get back to sleep. I'm exhausted."

Josh followed her and said, "See, I warned you about playing hostess to a bunch of kids."

"Oh hush," she said, swatting at his arm. "You know you love them all just as much as I do."

Leyla chuckled at the couple as they disappeared into their bedroom, and then turned to Jonathan. "Your mom's a character," she said with a smile.

"That she is." Jonathan returned the grin. "Come on; let's get these guys settled down."

Leyla nodded and looked forward for this long day to be finally over.

After what seemed like hours of dancing, Doris finally led Blake back to their table. She sat back in her chair with a sigh, her feet aching pleasantly from the exercise. Despite her misgivings, she found herself having a wonderful time with Blake.

"Want another drink?" Doris asked.

Blake shook her head. "No thank you," she answered. "Take me home?"

"Umm..." Doris's mind instantly replayed the far-too-many-to-count times a woman had said that same phrase to her in this same bar, but this time it was *Blake* saying the words. "Blake..."

Blake seemed oblivious to Doris's discomfort. "Come on, I need a ride," she said, grabbing her purse. "I left my car at home and took a cab here."

"Isn't that convenient?" Doris noted. "Cabs do go both ways, Blake."

"And you have a driver-slash-bodyguard, so let's go." Blake stood and headed for the door. After a few moments, Doris reluctantly followed.

The drive to Blake's house went by in a blur as the redhead chattered on about something or other, not that Doris was really listening. Her mind was busy playing out myriad scenarios, most of them X-rated. Finally, her driver pulled up in front of Blake's house and hopped out to hold the door open for them. Doris glanced at Blake, who had exited the car in a flash and was striding rapidly up the walk, and then growled at her driver, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

By the time Doris caught up with her, Blake had unlocked the door and was pushing it open. She turned to Doris and said, "Come in."

"No, thanks though, Blake," Doris said. "I'm going to head on home. Long day and all, you know how it is."

"Doris." Blake turned and fixed her with a steely gaze. "There is a madman on the loose in Springfield. Clarissa is away and I don't want to go in by myself."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Doris asked and waved her hand back toward her SUV. "I'll just get Jack and he can check out the house."

"I don't want Jack," Blake said. "I want you."

"Uh..." Doris's mind once again stalled, but it wasn't long before she found her voice. "Was that a double entendre?"

"Maybe." Blake smirked and entered the house.

Doris followed a moment later. Inside the living room, Blake dropped her keys on a bookshelf and turned on a small lamp resting next to it. "Have a seat," she said over her shoulder. "Please, make yourself at home."

Doris looked around the quiet space. "Looks like it's all clear, Blake. No big bad lurking in your corners."

Blake continued on toward the kitchen. "Have a seat," she repeated.

Doris sighed as Blake disappeared into the other room. The last time she had been in Blake's home, she had been beyond exhaustion and didn't take note of the small details. She looked around and noticed several framed pictures. She smiled at one of Blake with Clarissa and then another of her with her twin sons, but frowned when she saw a photo of Holly Reade and another one of Ross Marler. She stared at his photo for a long moment and then wandered over to the couch. "Stay away from the couch, Doris," she whispered to herself. "Don't go giving her any ideas." Detouring quickly, she took a seat on the recliner.

She turned her head at the sound of footsteps and watched as Blake approached her, holding a glass of white wine in each hand. Doris felt herself responding to Blake's warm smile as she held out one of the glasses to her. "How about a toast?"

Doris took the glass and started, "Blake..."

"To new beginnings!" Blake said and clinked her glass against Doris's.

Doris sighed and sniffed the wine before taking a small sip. It was a clean and crisp Sauvignon Blanc, pretty and delicate, just like Blake herself, Doris thought. Although Blake was probably more like a sunny and bright Chardonnay, with a tiny hint of oak depicting the woman's strong backbone.

"That's lovely, Blake," she said looking up at her friend standing over her. She put her glass down on the table next to the recliner. "But I really should go now."

"Don't go," Blake said and put her own glass down.

"I really..." Before Doris could stand, Blake pressed her hand against her chest, pushing Doris back into the seat cushions.

"Blake!" Doris barely had time to protest before she suddenly found her lap filled with a squirming Blake Marler. She gasped in surprise and found her mouth, like her lap, filled with a squirming Blake Marler.

For a few beautiful moments, Doris returned Blake's passionate kiss. She reached out with the intent of pushing Blake away from her, but her breath hitched as she encountered the smooth expanse of the woman's bare thighs, her dress having ridden up. Doris felt a rush of desire zing

through her body, instantly heightening all of her senses. She realized that she had never wanted another woman as much as she wanted Blake in this moment.

Doris groaned in pleasure as Blake continued to explore her mouth. Blake tasted like the wine, sweet and fruity, and Doris wanted to explore every inch of what the redhead was offering, to savor the delectable flavor she just knew was there waiting for her. Doris moaned again, helplessly.

As if encouraged by her response, Blake began to move her hands sensuously up Doris's body, finally coming to rest over her breasts in a gentle massage. Knowing this was probably the first time Blake had touched a woman like this, Doris felt her body again reacting, her hips surging forward to increase the contact with the other woman.

With a groan of her own, Blake tore her mouth away and trailed her lips along Doris's jaw line and down to her neck where she latched on with a wet kiss, her tongue teasing the skin in a promise of things to come. Doris again squeezed the firm legs clenching her tightly and wondered if they would make it to the bedroom before she exploded.

"Blake," she croaked out.

"Oh, Doris," Blake murmured and switched her attention to the other side of Doris's neck.

Doris's head moved back on its own to allow Blake more access, but she felt her desire quickly turning to fear. "Blake!" she said forcefully, finally managing to push the redhead back. "Stop."

Blake was panting as she leaned back and looked up to meet lust-darkened eyes. "What?" she asked shaking her head. "What's wrong?"

"Please, just stop," Doris begged.

"What?" she repeated. "Don't you want me?"

Doris knew that with her body burning with desire, it was useless to attempt to lie. "Of course I want you, Blake," she answered. "God, you are such a beautiful and sensual woman. Just last year I would have had you naked and in bed by now."

Blake gave her a sultry smile. "Sounds like a wonderful plan," she said huskily and leaned forward to kiss Doris again.

Doris put a hand on Blake's chest and pushed her back. "But Blake, this is now," she said. "I don't want just a fling or another one-night stand. I want more and I need it with someone I can trust."

"You can trust me."

"Can I?" Doris asked and Blake frowned. "I trusted Anna and she tore my heart out," Doris continued. "And tonight you lured me to Ladies Night under false pretenses, did all you could to get me into your home and now you're trying to seduce me into your bed. How do I know this is just not another typical Blake Marler seduction ploy?"

"What?" Blake's mouth dropped open in shock.

"You know, Blake," she said, her voice turning hard. "Like when you showed up in Coop's bed to try to seduce him. And why was that, Blake? Oh yeah, to steal him away from my daughter."

Blake finally pushed off of Doris, who managed to get to her feet after a brief struggle. "That was a long time ago, Doris!"

"Not that long," Doris shot back.

"I thought we were friends," Blake said, tears forming in her eyes.

"We were...are!" she said, running her hands through her disheveled hair. "We *are* friends, Blake, but like I said, for the first time in my life I feel free to have the kind of love everyone dreams about."

"You don't think you can have that with me?" Blake asked.

"Blake, you're not gay!" Doris said, waving her hands in frustration. "I've had enough of straight women to last me a lifetime. From the LUGs in college to the furtive housewives in the shadows at a gay bar, looking for a cheap thrill. It's happened to me over and over again. Once whatever itch they've got has been scratched, they go running back to their normal all-American lives."

Blake said forcefully, "That's not what I want from you, Doris Wolfe!" She stepped forward and poked her finger against Doris's chest. "I want forever too and I think we can have that together. Why can't you just give it a chance?"

"I can't, Blake," Doris said, tears forming in her eyes as the fear overwhelmed her. "It'll just hurt too much when you go back to your normal life." She turned to leave and heard Blake take a deep breath.

"All right, Doris," Blake said and Doris's heart nearly broke at the sorrow evident in her voice. "Go. Leave for now, but let me just say one thing."

Doris paused with her hand on the doorknob. "What?" she finally managed.

"I'm not going to give up," Blake said and Doris could hear her determination. "I am going to court you and woo you and romance you like you've never been before. And if it takes a week, a month, a year or a decade, then so be it. You're worth fighting for, Doris. And you're worth waiting for."

Doris didn't turn around or respond to the declaration, but simply said, "Good night, Blake." She stepped outside and made her way down the driveway blindly, getting into the car and fastening her seatbelt on autopilot. As she leaned back in her seat she allowed herself a small smile. "Romance, huh?" she whispered to herself and her smile widened at the thought.

A brisk knock on the back door caused Olivia to stop what she was doing to open it. Standing on the back porch was her best friend.

"Hey D," she said, turning back to the lunch she was preparing for her family. "Come on in."

"Thanks," Doris said and immediately headed over to the always-on coffee machine. "What are you making?"

"Grilled chicken Caesar salad," she answered. "Join us?"

Doris peered over Olivia's shoulder and looked at the cooked breasts her friend was slicing. "Yeah, you twisted my arm."

Olivia snorted. "Oh, the effort it takes to get you to eat my food."

"Where is everyone?" Doris asked.

"Natalia's upstairs with Sweet Pea, Leyla's in town and Jellybean is outside," Olivia answered.

"Yeah, I saw Emma raking leaves as I pulled in," Doris said. "What happened to the Turner kid who normally does your yard work?"

"Emma broke one of Reva's lamps last night during a fight with Clarissa," Olivia answered with a frown. "When I told her she had to pay for it, she was going to use her saved allowance, but I said she had to work it off and use that time to think about what she did."

"Good idea," Doris said. "You don't want her thinking that money can solve every problem."

"No, I don't," Olivia said. "So, what did you do last night?"

"Yeah, about that...lose your phone, Liv?" Doris asked, taking a seat at the table.

Olivia gave her a curious look. "I left it in my office yesterday," she answered.

Doris nodded. "When you retrieve it, you'll find an unauthorized text sent to me."

"Oh?" Olivia asked and went to the refrigerator to get the salad greens.

"Blake used it to lure me to Ladies Night, where she proceeded to wine and dine me," Doris answered and then took a sip of her coffee.

Olivia's eyebrows rose and she smirked at her friend. "And did you guys get to the sixty-nine part?"

"Almost," Doris answered and Olivia smiled at the sweet blush that bloomed on her friend's face. "She managed to get to second base before I ran."

Olivia paused in her preparations to look at Doris. "So let me get this straight...you had a beautiful woman wanting to make mad, passionate love to you and you ran away? Is that about right?"

"Got it in one, Liv," Doris said and refused to meet Olivia's eyes.

"What kind of lesbian are you?" Olivia asked, shaking her head as she went back to tearing lettuce leaves.

"A scared one, okay?" Doris said with a sigh. "I couldn't take getting hurt again, Olivia."

"I've got news for you, my friend," Olivia said. "You're already hurting, only this time you're hurting yourself. So what are you going to do? Spend the rest of your life alone because you're afraid to get close to anyone again?" She barely raised her head from the salad bowl as she gave Doris a piercing look. "And don't give me that bull about Blake being straight. Her orientation until now didn't matter. She's open to exploring a relationship with you, so why can't you be open to the possibility that you could be happy with her?"

"She said she's going to romance me until I give in," Doris said with a smile.

Olivia laughed. "Well, if she's using Natalia as inspiration on how to get her woman, you don't stand a chance. And face it, D...you're falling for her, if you haven't already, and I'm pretty sure it's reciprocal. Besides, I think Blake could be good for you; you need someone who isn't afraid to be out in the open. I also think you're much better for Blake than any of her past lovers. Certainly better than Frank."

"Yeah, what is it with Frank Cooper anyway?" Doris asked, her laughter showing Olivia that she was past her funk. "All the women he's slept with are turning gay."

"What about you, Doris?" Olivia asked, bringing the salad bowl over to the table. She swatted Doris's hand away as the mayor reached for a slice of chicken. "You ever sleep with Frank?"

"Not funny, Liv."

"Oh yeah, that's right," Olivia said and turned for the plates. "Forgot you had that gold star thing going."

Doris gave her a smirk. "Been reading lesbian fanfic again, Olivia?"

Both women laughed.

Olivia had just set another carved pumpkin on the front porch when she heard a vehicle pull up. She looked and saw her eldest daughter getting out of her car. Ava walked briskly up the cement path and handed her mother the bag she was carrying.

"Hi, Mom," she said, leaning over to kiss Olivia's cheek.

"Hi, honey," she said, glancing in the bag. "Thanks for picking these up."

"No problem." Ava smiled and headed for the front door.

"Wait a second," Olivia stopped her. "I want to talk to you about something and you can help me get the lights up." She ignored the guarded look her daughter gave her and reached for the aluminum ladder. "Hold the ladder steady while I tack these up."

She opened the package of pumpkin lights and they worked in silence for a few minutes until Olivia finally said, "So...care to tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on, Mom," Ava said and again avoiding her mother's stare.

Olivia turned to secure another string of the lights. "I ran into Cyrus Foley at the mini-mart yesterday."

Ava swore under her breath and Olivia continued, "I would ask what the hell you were thinking, but it's obvious you weren't."

"She's done nothing except cause trouble," Ava said. "She comes in where she's not wanted, lives here for free, gets a great job at the Beacon and causes trouble for you and Natalia. She needs to go, Mom!"

Olivia took a deep breath and then stepped off the ladder. "Ava," she said, turning to her daughter. "Are you going back to San Francisco?"

Ava backed up a moment. "What? No!"

"Do I need to point out that you live at the Beacon for free and have a great job there?" Olivia asked.

"That's different!" Ava said, waving off her mother's observation. "I'm your daughter."

"And Leyla is Natalia's sister," Olivia said. "She's just as much a part of this family as you or me or Emma. She is an essential component of this wonderful family we're building here. I told you this before, Ava...it's no longer just the three of us. Leyla is Natalia's flesh and blood and that makes her precious to me."

"So you're choosing her over me?" Ava said with tears in her eyes.

"No, honey," Olivia said, moving closer and placing her hands on Ava's arms, squeezing gently. "I'm choosing *both* of you. I need both of you in my life, as much as I need Natalia and Emma and Francesca. We're a family. Look, I'm not asking you to love her or even like her, but at least try not to kill her, okay?"

Ava pouted and thought for a moment. "All right, Mom," she said. "I guess it was a dumb idea."

"Ya think?" Olivia said, rolling her eyes. "Thanks, honey. Now...I'd like you to think about something. You know I've been seeing Dr. Boudreau, right? She's been helping me deal with everything, the wedding massacre mostly, but we also talk about other issues.

"That's great, Mom," Ava said. "I'm glad that she's helping you."

"She is, honey," Olivia said. "She's also helping me with the lingering grief I'm feeling over Max." She paused, watching Ava's carefully guarded face. "It's been really hard for me to see Remy with his new son, especially since Clayton looks a lot like Max."

"Well..." Ava started, her voice breaking on the single word and Olivia's heart ached for her daughter. "I mean, that's good, Mom."

"Ava," Olivia said. "Why don't you see Felicia, too?"

"I don't need her, Mom," Ava said, shaking her head. "I'm fine."

"Ava, I know you're hurting about this, because I am hurting too," Olivia said. "I think this self-destructive behavior is related to that. Talking to an impartial listener can help you work through it."

"How is getting rid of Leyla self-destructive?"

"Well, for one thing, you're missing out on what could be a good friendship with her," Olivia said and then waved that off. "But I'm talking about the phone call I got earlier from one of my security guards about having to forcibly remove some guy from your room last night."

"Oh Jesus!" Ava cried. "Is there anything you *don't* hear about in this town?"

"Probably not," Olivia said with a wry smirk. "Look, honey, you're an adult and are free to do what you want, but I just want you to be careful. Picking up strangers can be dangerous. Believe

me, I've been there, done that and am damn lucky I'm still here after all of my own attempts at self-destruction. So please, talk to Felicia."

Ava sighed and finally said, "I'll think about it, Mom. And I'll leave Leyla alone."

"Thanks, baby," Olivia said and hugged her daughter. "Now, let's go get the girls dressed!" Olivia bounced on her heels in anticipation.

Natalia bustled around the kitchen putting the final touches on the snacks for their guests. A knock on the door diverted her to open it, revealing Blake and her daughter. Natalia smiled at the young girl who was dressed in a severe red pantsuit. "Are you going as the mayor again, Clarissa?" she asked.

Clarissa shook her head. "No, the Secretary of State," she answered with a proud smile.

"Her political aspirations grew a tiny bit this past year," Blake deadpanned and Natalia laughed.

"Well, Jonathan and Sarah are in the living room playing the Wii and Emma should be dressed soon and we can get started."

"Yay!" the girl exclaimed. "Thanks, Natalia."

Natalia smiled at Blake as Clarissa left. "She's adorable."

"Thank you," Blake said and then paused as she grabbed a carrot stick from the platter. "Um...so is Doris here? I thought I saw her car in the driveway."

"Yes, she's upstairs helping Olivia with the girls," Natalia said and handed Blake a napkin. When her friend fidgeted, she peered at Blake, seeing discomfort written across her face. "What's going on, Blake?"

"Oh, I kind of got her to go out with me last night," Blake admitted.

Natalia just stared at her friend. "And how did you manage that?" she asked.

"Um, sent her a text from Olivia's phone," Blake said. "I went to the Beacon to see Olivia about something, but she'd already left. When I saw her phone on the desk, I figured that Doris wouldn't refuse to meet with her since they're such good friends."

"Oh boy," Natalia said. "Where did you ask her to meet you?"

"Ladies Night," Blake said.

"*Ladies Night?*" Natalia goggled. "You tricked Doris to meet you at a gay bar by pretending to be my girlfriend?"

"Well, sort of, but we had a really great time," Blake said. "At least until she ran out of my house like a scared rabbit."

Natalia put a hand to her head and rubbed her temple. "Oh boy," she said. "I don't even want to think about what you did once you got her home."

Blake sighed happily. "Oh it was so great, Natalia," she said. "I never imagined that kissing a woman could feel so wonderful. It's so...soft."

Natalia smiled at her friend. "It is," she said softly. "But you shouldn't have tricked her like that, Blake. Doris deserves better than that. She deserves honesty."

"I know," Blake said. "You're right and I guess when I sent that text I wasn't thinking straight."

Natalia snorted in amusement at Blake's choice of words. Blake gave her a ghost of a smile.

"Do you really care about her Blake?" Natalia asked.

"Yeah, I do," Blake answered, her face revealing the truth of her statement.

"Then just give her time," Natalia advised. "That was a hard lesson I had to learn after I got back from the retreat. As much as you might want something to happen, there comes a point when you just need to step back and wait for the other person to arrive at the same place you're in."

"I just hope I haven't blown it," Blake said, glancing down at the floor.

Natalia cocked her head as she heard Doris's voice out in the living room moving toward the kitchen. "I think you might just find out now," she said.

The door swung open and Natalia watched the silent drama as the mayor caught sight of Blake. Doris's resulting smile provided both of them with an answer.

Natalia smirked as the two women stared at each other. Then she cleared her throat and watched Doris swing her head toward the sound, a faint blush tinting her face. "Uh...Natalia," she said and then cleared her throat. "Liv needs you upstairs, please."

"Oh sure," Natalia said. "If you guys can finish up?" She waited a moment, but the other women were back to gazing shyly at one another. With a happy smile for her friends, she left the kitchen.

Ava stepped through the front door and into the bustling living room. She glanced around, looking for her cousin. He was leaning casually against the wall as he chatted animatedly with

Leyla Rivera. Ava watched as the Latina threw back her head and laughed at something he had said. Suppressing a frown, she approached them.

"Hey, Cuz," Jonathan said.

"Hi, Jon...Leyla," she managed.

"I was just telling Leyla about the haunted cemetery on San Cristobel that we kids used to spend the night in as a way to prove we were macho," he laughed.

"Fun," Ava commented dryly.

"Not as crazy as Springfield, though," he chuckled with a warm smile at Leyla.

"I'm so looking forward to tonight," Leyla said, returning the smile. "It's been a long time I've been out trick-or-treating."

Ava gave an internal roll of her eyes and then said to Jonathan, "Anna just arrived. She wants your help to coordinate this shindig."

"Oh sure," he said. "Be right back."

Ava watched Leyla watch Jonathan as he hurried out of the house. "So...Leyla," she said to get the girl's attention.

Leyla turned to her with a wary expression. "Ava," she said in reply.

"Yeah, look...I'm sorry about yesterday," Ava said. "You know, flying off the handle and all."

"Okay," Leyla said, accepting the apology. "I'm sorry, too. For, you know, bringing up things I shouldn't have."

Ava struck out a hand. "Truce?" she asked. When Leyla didn't answer, she added, "For family's sake?"

Leyla gave a tight nod and shook Ava's hand. "For the family."

Doris laughed at herself as she realized she had no reason to feel so shy around her friend, since it seemed Blake clearly didn't think any less of her for bolting the night before. "So I guess I've been replaced, huh?" she finally said.

Blake looked confused for a moment and then smiled. "You mean Clarissa? Yeah. She's replaced one great female role model for another."

"So I see," Doris said and then added a flirtatious tone to her voice. "And is her mother that fickle as well?"

Blake shook her head. "No," she answered emphatically. "She knows exactly what she wants."

Doris smiled warmly. "Good," she answered.

When Natalia entered Emma's room, she saw Olivia running her hands through her hair in a sign of frustration. "What's up?" she asked and frowned at their daughter who was sitting on her bed with her arms wrapped around her legs and her chin resting on her knees. "Emma, why aren't you ready for trick-or-treating?"

The girl mumbled her reply into her knees.

"Excuse me?" Natalia asked again, her frown deepening.

"I said I'm *not* going!" Emma cried in a loud voice.

Natalia blinked in surprise as Olivia said, "Emma! Don't talk to your mother like that."

"I don't understand, Emma," Natalia said, moving toward the bed and sitting beside her daughter. Emma cringed away. "I thought you wanted to go. We worked on your costume and everything."

"Halloween is stupid," Emma said, still speaking into her knees, refusing to look up and meet her mothers' eyes. "It's for babies and I'm not a baby."

"It is not for babies. Clarissa is older than you are," Natalia pointed out. "She looks adorable, too. And so will you when you put on your costume."

"No!" Emma said.

Natalia looked helplessly at her partner who threw up her hands.

"Jellybean, it's your sister's first Halloween, you don't want to miss that," Olivia said.

"And I promised your brother I'd send him lots of photos," Natalia added. "You don't want to disappoint Rafe, do you?"

"I don't care!" Emma said. "I'm *not* going!"

"All right, fine," Olivia said, giving up. "Stay here then, but no candy for you and tomorrow after school, you're going to clean the barn."

Emma didn't respond to her punishment; she just burrowed more deeply into herself.

Olivia followed Natalia out of the room and closed the door silently. Their eyes met and Olivia's heart ached at the pain in Natalia's eyes. "She'll be all right," she said.

"I know," Natalia said. "Why is she acting like this?"

"She's been through a lot, Natalia," Olivia said. "We all have, but first Jane and then the wedding...I'd be more worried if she wasn't acting out."

Natalia sighed. "I just hate it when we have to discipline her."

Olivia nodded her agreement. "I'll ask Ava to stay with her," she said. "I'm not letting Emma's bad behavior keep either of us from missing Sweet Pea's first Halloween."

Natalia nodded and sighed again as she glanced back at Emma's closed door.

Downstairs, Olivia smiled at her daughter who was standing with Leyla, pleased to see that Ava was attempting to at least be friendly with Natalia's sister.

"Where's Emma, Mom?" Ava asked.

"Upstairs," Olivia answered. "She doesn't want to go trick-or-treat and I'm tired of arguing with her. Will you stay with her while the rest of us go?"

Ava glanced at Leyla who was watching as Jonathan came walking back into the house. Olivia noted her daughter's subtle smirk.

"Sorry, Mom," Ava answered. "I've got plans tonight, just came to see you guys off."

Olivia narrowed her eyes. "Not a repeat performance of last night?" she asked.

Ava waved her hand dismissively. "No, no," she said. "Going to catch a horror movie with some friends."

Olivia knew Ava didn't really have friends in town any more, but she chose not to call her daughter on it in front of other people. She turned to Leyla and raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Leyla's face fell as she glanced back toward Jonathan, but then she plastered on a cheerful smile. "Sure, no problem, Olivia," she said.

"Thanks," Olivia said gratefully, not missing the way Ava's smirk turned triumphant.

Anna Li poked her head into the house. "All right, gang," she called. "Let's get this show on the road."

As everyone started to file out of the house, Natalia turned to Olivia, who was watching Jonathan carry Francesca in his arms. "Are you all right?" she asked quietly.

Olivia shook her head. "No," she answered, tears starting to fall from her eyes. "Emma's upstairs, angry and acting out, and Ava just did that to deliberately hurt Leyla."

"I know," Natalia said and Olivia again realized that there wasn't much her lover missed. "It'll be okay, *mi amor*."

"I don't know..." she started.

"Shh..." Natalia interrupted as she took Olivia into her arms. "It *will* be. I promise. Our family is strong and we'll work through this and we will be fine."

Olivia laid her head on Natalia's strong shoulder and soaked up the comfort. Despite her doubts at her partner's assertions, she knew that with this amazing woman at her side, they could do anything.